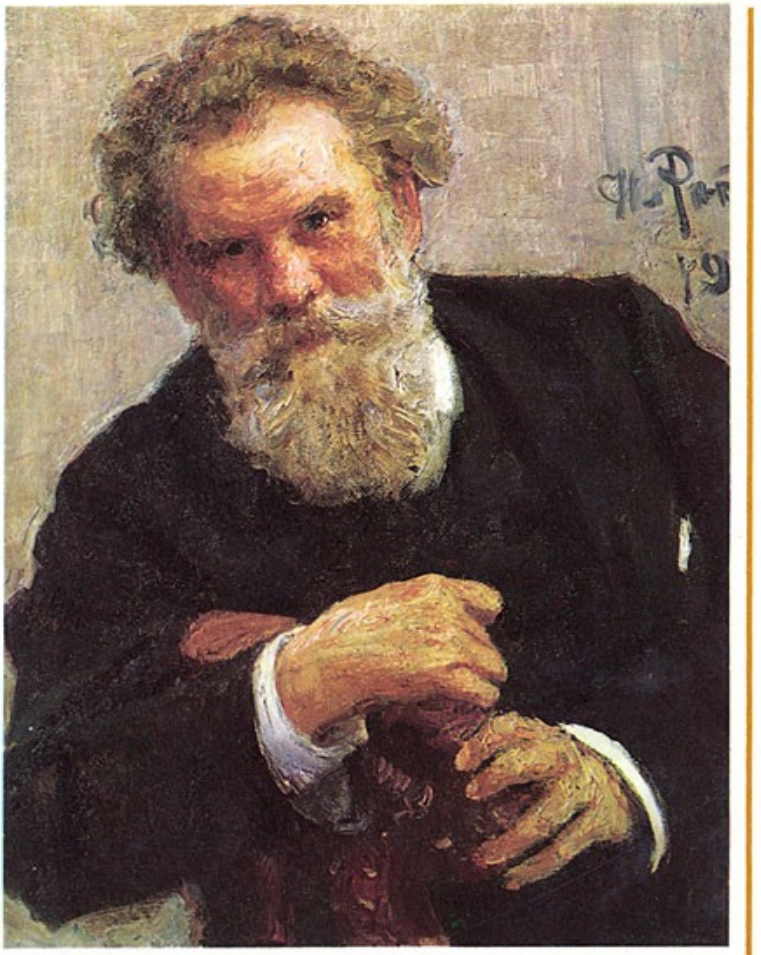
PROGRESS · RUSSIAN CLASSICS SERIES

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO
Selected Stories



A distinguished writer of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Vladimir Korolenko (1853-1921) was one of the most attractive public figures of his day. Maxim Gorky, who was closely acquainted with Korolenko, wrote: “Every talk I had with him strengthened the impression of V. G. Korolenko as a great humanist. I have never met among cultivated Russians anyone with such a thirst for truth and justice, any-one feeling so keenly the need for embodying that truth in life ”

Korolenko’s literary heritage consists of his stories, short novels, his voluminous *The History of My Contemporary,* a half-century chronicle of Russi-an life, sketches of Siberia, where he lived in exile, his reminiscences of Tolstoy, Chekhov, Garshin and other writers.

The, present volume contains Korolenko’s best works of the seventies and eighties of the last century. A line from one of his own stories may well serve as an epigraph to this book: “Man

is born for happiness as a bird for flight.”

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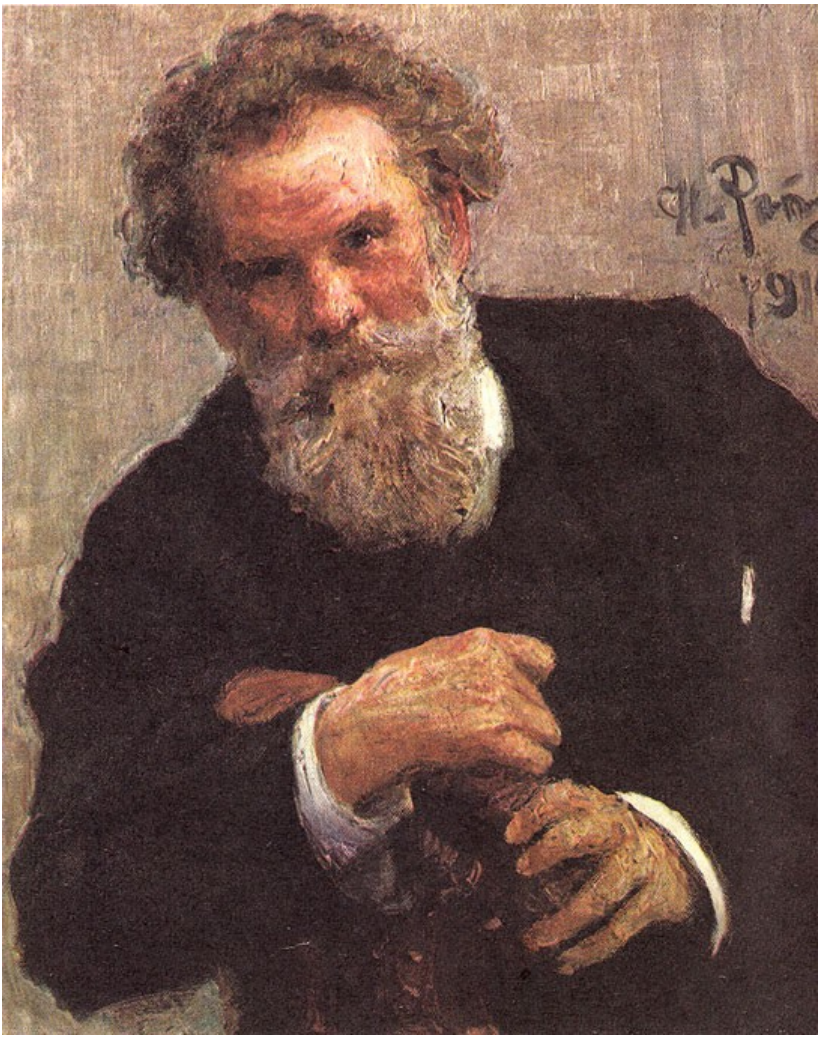

PROGRESS * RUSSIAN CLASSICS SERIES

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

SELECTED STORIES

Progress Publishers

Moscow

1978

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NOTES

From REMINISCENCES OF V. G. KOROLENKO

With the name of V. G. Korolenko I associate many fond memories but understandably I can touch upon them only briefly here.[1]

I first met him I believe in 1888 or 1889. Upon arriving then in Nizhni Novgorod, from where I do not remember, I learned that the writer Korolenko, recently returned from exile in Siberia, resided there. I had already read stories signed by that name, and I remember them evoking a new impression which did not accord with the one received from the literature of the Populists, a study of which was in those days considered a must for every young person roused to an interest in public life.

In their journalistic writings the Narodniks were frankly telling you to “see just so, think so”, and this appealed to many persons who were accustomed to the idea of being led. To every reader, on the other hand, who was the least bit discerning, it was clear that Korolenko’s stories in no way set out to coerce either the mind or the senses.

At that time I moved in the circle of “radicals”, as the remains of the Narodniks called them-selves, and in that circle Korolenko’s work had not met with much favour. His story “Makar’s Dream” was read, but his other works were treated sceptically, placed in a row with Anton Chekhov’s small gems which, needless to say, had utterly failed to evoke a serious attitude from the radicals.

To some the new approach in portraying characters from the people in the stories “Following the Icon” and “The River Plays” seemed to betray in the author an objectionable scepticism. “In the Night”, going against the grain of the rationalists, gave rise to a good deal of harsh and bitter criticism.

The radicals were opposed by the *Kulturtragers,* persons who set out on the arduous task of reappraising old beliefs, and who were at loggerheads with the radicals. It was as “good-for-nothings” that the radicals referred to the *Kulturtragers.* These “good-for-nothings” regarded V.G. Korolenko’s work with watchful interest, and held a high opinion of its lyric beauty and keen perception of life.

Essentially it was people of kind heart taking issue with persons of inquisitive mind. And today the total irrelevancy of

1 These reminiscences are contained in a speech made by Maxim Gorky in 1918 in Petrograd at a meeting held to mark Korolenko’s 65th birthday.

this dispute stemming from the prejudices of enlightened persons is more than obvious, for Korolenko had equally much to offer both to people of the heart and of the mind. Nevertheless, there were many persons at the time to whom the new writer's revision of the long-established and accepted judgments and opinions concerning the Russian people seemed to be alien, distasteful and hostile to their cherished idol of a sacred tradition.

Resentment was roused by Tyulin, the main character of the story "The River Plays", a type that all knew well in life, yet who was utterly unlike the standard fictional *muzhik,* such as Polikoushka,[1] Uncle Minai[2] and others beloved by the intelligentsia—the idealists, sufferers, martyrs and truth lovers with whom Russian literature so densely peopled the poverty-stricken and squalid villages. Much as this Vetluga loafer was unlike the fictional *muzhik,* he bore a staggering resemblance to the Russian character in general, a hero for an hour, stirred to action only at a moment of great peril and even so for a brief spell.

I remember well the heated arguments around Tyulin—was he a peasant in the flesh or the invention of the writer? The *Kulturtragers* maintained that he was a true and real type, powerless to build new forms of life and devoid of the propensity of expanding his intellectual faculties.

"With a type like that European forms of statehood are not to be achieved soon," they said. "Tyulin is Oblomov in peasant garb."

The radicals on the other hand, screamed that Tyulin was an idle figment, that European culture was no model to follow and that Polikoushka and Uncle Minai would produce a culture more original than that of the West.

These heated arguments and sharply opposing opinions awakened in me a keen interest in the man who had the power to stir people's minds and hearts, and, having written something like a poem in prose which I believe I called "Song of the Old Oak", I took the manuscript to Korolenko.

His appearance surprised me greatly, for Korolenko did not correspond to my idea of a writer or a political exile. For what reason I do not know, but I imagined the writer to be lean-looking, highly strung and voluble. Korolenko, on the other hand, was stocky, amazingly calm, with a healthy face framed

1 Main character of Lev Tolstoy's story of the same name.

2 Popular personage of an essay by the Narodnik writer N. Koronin-Petropavlovsky.

in a thick, curly beard, and clear, keen-sighted eyes.

Nor did he resemble the political exiles among whom I already had wide acquaintance: they seemed to me to be invariably somewhat embittered and just a trifle vain about their experiences.

Korolenko was serene and utterly unaffected. As he turned the pages of my manuscript, lying in his lap, he brought home to me with astonishing clarity, graphically and briefly, that I had written a poor poem, and what was in fact wrong with it. His words sank deeply into my mind:

"In our youth we all incline towards pessimism. I hardly know why—perhaps because we want so much and achieve little...."

I was amazed at his subtle grasp of the mood which had prompted me to write "The Song of the Old Oak", and I can remember how ashamed and embarrassed I was at having taken up his time in reading and criticising my poem. It was the first time I showed my work to a writer and I was extremely lucky to hear such apt and devastating criticism of it.

I repeat that I was forcibly struck by Korolenko's plain and clear speech; the people among whom I lived spoke the recondite and ponderous language of magazine articles.

Shortly after this first meeting with Korolenko I left Nizhni Novgorod. I returned three years later, after having tramped through central Russia and the Ukraine, roaming and living in Bessarabia, the Crimea and the Caucasus. Having seen and experienced much, I had gleaned a wealth of impressions and felt like a rich man who does not know what to do with his riches, one who foolishly squanders his treasures, throwing them around for anybody who has a mind to pick them up.

I did not so much relate my impressions as ask of what moment and value they were.

In such elated spirits I once again met Korolenko. Sitting in his small, crammed dining-room, I spoke of my deepest anxieties—of the searchers for truth, of homeless and vagrant Russia, of the hard life in the squalid and greedy villages.

V.G. listened with a thoughtful smile in his clever bright eyes and asked suddenly:

"Have you noticed that all the seekers after truth roving on the big roads are greatly enamoured of themselves?"

I had not noticed it, to be sure, and was amazed at the question.

V.G. added:

"And to tell the truth, they are terrible loafers...."

He said this good-humouredly rather than condemningly, which only added weight and meaning to his words. His whole figure and every gesture spoke of serene strength, and the attentiveness with which he listened committed one to speak briefly and to the point. His good eyes and their thoughtful glance weighed the intrinsic worth of your words, so that willy-nilly you demanded from yourself pithy words that could most aptly describe your thoughts and feelings. I departed from him with quite an inkling of what distinguished his stories about human beings from the stories of other people. Before it had seemed to me, as to many others, that the impartial voice of a truthful artist was the voice of indifference.

However, Korolenko's thoughtful remarks concerning the Russian peasants, monks and seekers after truth revealed him to be a man who did not set himself up to be a judge of people, but loved them with his eyes open and with the kind of love that brings small joy and a good deal of pain.

That year I started contributing little stories to newspapers, and on one occasion, moved by the death of A.S. Gatsissky, a Nizhni-Novgorod man, who- had been a prominent figure in enlightenment, I wrote a kind of fantastic piece in which peasants spoke over an intellectual's grave in grateful terms about his life.

Meeting me in the street, V.G., smiling good-humouredly, said: "Well, that was poorly devised. I see no point in writing such pieces."

Evidently he followed my work. My calls were not frequent but practically every time we met he had something to say about my stories.

"You made a mistake in publishing 'Arkhipand Lyonka' in the newspaper *Volgar,* it could have been brought out in a magazine," he said.

"You are too verbose when you should be terse and succinct."

"Don't embellish people...."

His counsel and criticism were always brief and to the point, containing just the kind of guidance I needed. I received many good tips from Korolenko and a good deal of attention. And if for various unavoidable reasons I had not availed myself of his help, the fault and the regret are mine.

It is well known that my association with the country's leading magazines began with his help.[1]

1 M. Gorky has in mind his story "Chelkash" written under the impression of

In conclusion I should like to say that over the twenty-five years of my literary work I have seen and known practically all the leading writers, and had the great honour of knowing, too, a colossus like Lev Tolstoy.

To me V.G. Korolenko stands apart from them all, holding his own singular position, the importance of which has to this day been inadequately appreciated. I find personally that this prominent and beautiful writer has told me a great deal about the Russian people which no one before him was capable of saying. He uttered it in the subdued voice of a sage who knows full well that all wisdom is relative and that there is no eternal truth. But the truth expressed by the character of Tyulin is an immense truth. In this character we are given a historically true type of a Great Russian—a man who has now broken free from the strong chains of the dead past and can build life as he wants to.

I believe that he will build it as he finds it fit for himself and I know that in the prodigious task of building the new Russia the superb contribution of V.G. Korolenko, a most honest Russian writer, a man of big and powerful heart, will find deserving appreciation.

Maxim Gorky

---

a talk with Korolenko and brought out with his help in the magazine *Russkoye Bogatstvo* (Russian Wealth). Hitherto Gorky's stories had appeared in the provincial press only

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

IN BAD COMPANY

From a Friend’s Childhood Recollections

I.

THE RUINS

My mother died when I was six. My father, overcome by grief, seemed to have completely forgotten my existence. He would sometimes caress my little sister, and took care of her in his own way, for she was the picture of our mother. But I grew up like some wild sapling in the fields; no one took any particular notice of me, nor were any restraints put on my freedom.

The little town in which we lived was called Knyazhe-Veno, or Princes Town. It had been the seat of a declining but proud

Polish family, and had the typical features of most small towns in the south-western provinces, where amid the humdrum life of hard toil and the petty bustle of Jewish businesses, the last of the Polish nobles lived in the sad eclipse of their former grandeur.

When you approached the town from the east, the first building to strike the eye would be the prison, the town's most conspicuous piece of architecture. The town itself stretched lower down, along the banks of its drowsy, mouldy ponds. Leading to it was a gently sloping road with the usual town "gate". A sleepy invalided soldier, his sun-blotched figure itself a mark of undisturbed slumber, slowly raised the cross-bar—and you were inside the town before you were aware of it. Grey fences and waste ground strewn with all kinds of rubbish now alternated with half-blind little hovels sunken deep into the earth. Further on was a wide square, from different points of which there gaped at you the dark gateways of the Jewish inns, and where government offices struck a dismal note with their stark whitewashed walls and severe barracks-like fronts. You got across a

narrow river over a wooden bridge so decrepit with age that it creaked and swayed under the weight of your carriage. The bridge led to the Jewish quarter with its big and small shops, moneychangers behind open counters, and women peddling their hot buns in the street beneath sun shades and awnings. There was stench and dirt, and swarms of children rolling about in the dust. But, in the matter of a minute, you would be out in the open again. Birches softly whispered over the graveyard, the wind stirred the wheat fields, and drew a doleful, unending tune from the telegraph wires along the road.

The river spanned by the tumble-down bridge took its source from one pond and emptied into another. The town was therefore boarded north and south by broad stretches of water and marshland. From year to year the ponds grew more shallow and overgrown with duck weed; thick tall reeds, billowing like the sea, spread in the vast marshy spaces. There was an island in the middle of one of the ponds. On the island stood an old castle half-buried in ruins.

I recall with what awe I gazed upon that grand, decaying building. The most weird tales were told about it, and it was said about the island itself that it had been artificially piled up by the labours of Turkish prisoners of war. "The old castle stands on human bones," said the old people of the town, and with dread I used to picture to myself thousands of Turkish skeletons upholding with their bony arms the island, with its tall Lombardy poplars and the old castle. It made the castle, of course, appear more awesome still. Even on some bright summer days when, made brave by the sunlight and bird calls, we ventured quite close, we would be seized by sudden panic. So frightening would be the black empty windows staring at us, the deserted rooms so alive with mysterious rustling, and so eerie the echo of dropping stone chips and plaster, that we ran for dear life, with a strange thumping, stamping and cackle ringing in our ears.

But on stormy autumn nights, when the huge poplars tossed and moaned in the gusts swept in from beyond the ponds, the old castle inspired the whole town with terror. The terrified Jews cried—*Oi-vei-mir,* the pious old women crossed

themselves, and even the smith, our neighbour, who denied demonkind as such, would not come out into his little backyard on such nights without making the sign of the cross and mumbling a prayer for the dead souls' repose.

Old, grey-bearded Janusz, who for want of lodgings had taken shelter in one of the castle's cellars, said that he clearly heard cries coming from under the ground on such nights. The Turks waxed unruly, rattling their bones and loudly rebuking the Polish lords for their cruelty. Arms clanged in the halls of the castle and around it on the island. With loud cries the Polish lords rallied their men. Janusz claimed that he could hear quite distinctly, despite the howling of the storm, the tramp of the horses, the clanking of swords, and shouts of command. He even assured us that one day he had heard the great-grandfather of the present count, who had been famous for his bloody deeds, ride into the middle of the island, and swear at the Turks, bidding them to hold their tongues and calling them "sons of bitches".

The descendants of that count had left their ancestral halls long ago. The greater

part of the gold pieces and the treasures which had once filled their strong-boxes found their way across the bridge into the Jewish hovels; and the last scions of that glorious family had erected for themselves a plain white stone house on top of a hill, at some distance from the town. There, in haughty and contemptuous seclusion, they dragged out a dull but yet imposing existence.

Sometimes the old count, as much a ruin himself as the castle on the island, would appear in the town on his English mare, accompanied by his daughter, gaunt and majestic, dressed in a black habit, who rode by his side, and followed at a respectful distance by a groom. The proud countess was doomed to spinsterhood. The noblemen who might have aspired to her hand, went out into the world in pursuit of foreign merchants' rich daughters, abandoning their ancestral homes or selling them for a song to the Jews, and there was no one left in the town who might have dared to raise his eyes to the fair lady. Whenever we children saw this party of three, we took to our heels, disappearing from the dusty streets like a flight of scared birds, scuttling into our

yards and from there staring at the solemn-faced owners of the awesome castle.

On a hill west of the town, amid sunken tombs and crumbling crosses, stood a long-abandoned chapel. It had once been the cherished offspring of the staid town that lay in the valley below. In answer to the tolling of its bell, gathered the townsmen, clad in their clean, if not sumptuous, jerkins and carrying staves instead of the clanging sabres of the gentry, summoned, too, by the chapel bell from the outlying hamlets.

The chapel commanded a view of the island and its tall dark poplars. But the castle, hiding scornfully behind its mantle of shrubbery, was lost to sight, except for those moments when the south-west wind, breaking loose from the wall of reeds, would sweep upon the island. Then from behind the wind-tossed poplars one caught the gleam of windows, and the castle seemed to scowl at the chapel. Now both were dead. Gone were the castle's bright eyes and the play of the evening glow on them; the chapel's roof had fallen in in several places and the plaster had dropped off its walls, and instead of the clear treble

of the bell, the ill-omened hooting of the owls filled it by night.

However, it was even after their death that the old-time dissension dividing the proud lordly castle and the burgher chapel continued; it was sustained by the creatures crawling in the vaults and cellars of the decayed buildings, like worms in the graves of the dead.

At one time the old castle offered asylum to all paupers, making no demands in return. All in our town who had no place to live, wrecks of humanity lacking for whatever reason the means to secure shelter for the night or in foul weather, would wend their way to the island and lie down their weary limbs among the ruins, paying for their lodging but with the risk run of burial beneath crumbling rubble. The comment—"He lives in the castle"—had come to indicate the direst poverty and a citizen's lowest station. Cordial welcome was equally extended by the ancient castle to clerks in straitened circumstances, lonely old women, and vagabonds. And all these creatures hacked and tugged at the decrepit building, chipping the floors and ceilings into fuel, made fires, cooked what food they could

get, and in some unknown way clung to their human existence.

But there came a day when quarrels had broken out among these homeless refugees nestling in the old castle's ruins. It occurred when old Janusz, who had once been some menial official of the count's, somehow got himself a kind of property deed, and took the reins of management into his hands. He launched a campaign of reform, and for several days such clamour and screaming issued from the island that one might have well thought the Turkish captives had broken loose from their subterranean dungeons to avenge their inquisitors. But it was only Janusz sorting out the population of the ruins, separating the sheep from the goats. Kept on in the castle, the sheep assisted Janusz in expelling the unfortunate goats who, loath to leave, put up a desperate but hopeless resistance. When order at long last was restored on the island, with the weighty, if not articulate, help of the local policeman, it became apparent that the coup was of a pronounced aristocratic nature. It was only "good Christians" or Catholics, moreover those who had been servants or were descendants of the servants in the count's

household, that Janusz had retained. These were blue-nosed old men in shabby coats of the old Polish style, leaning on knobby sticks, and shrill-voiced, ugly old women, for all their penury, still clinging to their old-time bonnets and cloaks. And they formed a single, close-knit aristocratic grouping, claiming an exclusive right to respectable mendicancy. On week days, their lips framed in prayer, they would visit the homes of the more prosperous townspeople to spread gossip, complain bitterly of their fate and cadge what they might. On Sundays, they formed the most respectable section of the personages lining up in long rows in front of the Catholic churches to grandly receive alms offered in the name of "our Lord Jesus", and "our Lady, the Virgin Mary".

Attracted by the tumult and the shouting that came from the island during that revolution, I crossed over with a few of my playmates, and hid among the poplars. From behind their thick trunks, we observed Janusz, at the head of his army of blue-nosed old men and old hags, drive out the last of the castle's dwellers, who had been doomed to expulsion. Dusk was gathering, and rain was coming down from

a cloud that hung low over the poplars. Several unfortunate wretches scuttled about the island—scared, pitiful, ashamed, hugging their tatters about them. Like moles driven from their burrows by spirited boys, they anxiously sought some opening leading into the castle so that they could slip into it unnoticed. But Janusz and his old witches chased them off, with shouts and curses, and brandishing sticks and pokers, while a policeman, armed with a heavy club, stood silently by, maintaining a neutrality in which his sympathy for the triumphant party was apparent. The poor wretches in the end retreated despairingly across the bridge, abandoning the island forever, and one by one were swallowed up by the rainy murk of the swiftly gathering evening.

After that memorable evening, the old castle which had formerly held for me the flavour of majesty, had lost, as did Janusz, too, all fascination. I had liked to visit the island, admiring, if only from a distance, the hoary walls and the moss-covered roof. And when, in the early morning, the castle's assorted dwellers would emerge from their shelter, yawning, coughing and crossing themselves in the sunlight, I had

regarded them, too, with an esteem, as beings invested with the same mystery which enveloped the castle. For they slept there by night, and they heard whatever went on in those vast halls, into whose paneless windows the moonlight streamed or the storm winds burst in. I had liked to listen, too, to Janusz, when, making himself comfortable under the poplars, he held forth with the loquacity of his seventy years on the past glory of the old building. The past would then come alive in my childish imagination. Into my soul reached the breath of lost grandeur, and there stirred in me vague regrets for that which had once made up the existence of the crumbling walls. Romantic shades of the past flitted through my mind in the way that faint shadows of clouds flit across the bright green growth of a field on a windy day.

But from that evening, I saw both Janusz and the castle in a new light. Meeting me not far from the island the next day, Janusz urged me to come to visit him. "The son of such worthy parents", he assured me with obvious satisfaction, can now show up at the castle without hesitation, for he would find there only the most respectable

company. Indeed, he took me by the hand and led me almost to the castle door, but I jerked away my hand and ran off with tears in my eyes. The castle had become hateful to me. The windows in the upper storey were boarded; the women who clung to their bonnets and cloaks were in possession of the lower storey; and these old women creeping out of the castle looked so repulsive to me, flattered me with such sickening sweetness, and quarrelled among themselves so loudly, that I wondered at their being tolerated at all by the dead count who had restrained the Turks on stormy nights. But, above all, I could not forget the heartless cruelty with which these people had expelled their unfortunate mates. The thought of those outcasts, left without shelter, wrung my heart.

Be as it may, the example of the old castle brought home to me the truth of there being but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous. As regards the castle, the sublime had become overgrown with ivy, creeper and moss, while the ridiculous seemed hideous and appalling to my childish mind, which as yet was incapable

of grasping the irony behind these contrasts.

II.

QUEER CHARACTERS

Following the social changes on the island, a few exceedingly restless nights were spent in the town. Dogs barked, doors creaked, and the citizens kept running out of their houses and hammering on their fences with sticks—to indicate that they were on the alert. The town knew only too well that in the long cheerless nights wretched and starving human beings were wandering about its streets, drenched with rain and shivering with cold; and knowing the hard feelings these outcasts must harbour in their hearts, the town was on its guard and took care to answer such feelings with threats. And, as luck would have it, the rain and the cold continued night after night, the clouds driven low over the earth with each

new day. A wind raged through the wetness, rocking the tree-tops, rattling the shutters, reminding me as I lay in bed of the dozens of my fellow beings denied warmth and shelter.

But then spring triumphed at length over these last efforts of the winter to hold its own, the sun dried the earth, and the outcasts were no longer seen. The dogs ceased to bark by night, the citizens stopped hammering their sticks on the fences, and town life lapsed back into its accustomed drowsy monotony. Queen of the sky, the hot sun shone on the dusty streets; the sons of Israel who sold in the shops prudently put up awnings; brokers lolled lazily in the heat and kept a watchful eye for strangers to do a stroke of business; the scratching and creaking of pens could be heard from the open windows of government offices, the ladies went to market in the morning with baskets, and promenaded in the cool of the evening on their husbands' arms, with their gowns trailing behind them in the street dust. Without jarring on the scene, the old men and women of the castle primly paid their customary visits to the homes of their benefactors. The

townspeople readily recognised their right to live and thought it quite the order of things to dispense alms on Saturdays, which the dwellers of the castle received as respectably as they were willingly distributed.

For the unfortunate exiles from the castle, however, life remained as unsettled as before. True, they no longer loitered in the streets by night. It was said that they had found shelter on the hill where the chapel stood, but how they could make do with such shelter, no one could tell. However, they had been seen—the oddest and most suspicious-looking figures climbing down of a morning into the towns from the hills and gullies surrounding the chapel and disappearing in the same direction when the evening drew on. They were like dark blots punctuating the drabness of the town, and disturbed its quiet, sleepy flow of life; the town's dwellers regarded them with apprehensive and hostile eyes. And, in their turn, they viewed the smugness around them with roving, searching glances that made many of the town dwellers go cold inside. In no way did they resemble the aristocratic beggars of the castle, and the town would

not accept them, nor did they ask for acceptance. Their attitude to the town was definitely aggressive. They would abuse a townsman rather than wheedle him; take rather than beg. Either they were cruelly victimised, if they were weak, or caused the townsfolk to suffer, when possessing the necessary strength to do that. More so, as it often happens, there were those among this ragged, miserable band of outcasts who in wit and talents might have been a credit to the select society of the castle, but finding that society uncongenial, had preferred the more democratic company of the chapel. Some of these persons, it should be added, bared the stamp of stark tragedy.

To this day I remember the merry uproar in the street that greeted the bent, sad figure of the "Professor". He was a silent, demented creature, in an old faded frieze overcoat and a hat with a huge brim and a tarnished cockade. He earned his academic title, it seems, as a result of a vague rumour of his once having been a tutor somewhere. It was hard to imagine a more meek and harmless being. It was his wont to quietly and aimlessly roam the streets with a blank stare and drooping

head. The town's idlers knew him to possess two peculiarities of which they took cruel advantage to amuse themselves. The first was that the "Professor" was perpetually mumbling under his breath. No one could make head or tail of what he was saying. Like the bubbling of a turbid streamlet, flowed his speech, and he would fix his blank stare upon the listener, as if in an attempt to bring the elusive meaning of his harangueing home to him. He could be wound up like a machine; all one of the brokers who got tired of dozing in the street had to do was to beckon to him to approach and pose a question. Wagging his head, his faded eyes peering pensively at the listener, the "Professor" would get started on a run of extremely melancholy mumblings. The listener, if he pleased, could walk away, or doze off; on waking he would find the sad sombre figure still standing there and softly mumbling his unintelligible words. But this trait in itself was not of particular interest. It was another peculiarity of the "Professor" that made him easy sport for the street loafers: the violent excitement into which the mere mention of sharp or cutting instruments would throw him. And therefore, at the

height of the inscrutable flow of eloquence, the listener would suddenly get up from the ground and start yelling in a shrill voice: "Knives, scissors, needles and pins!" Upon this rude intrusion, the startled man would flap his arms, like a wounded bird its wings, cast a terrified look about him and claw his bosom feverishly. Alas, what depths of human suffering remain concealed to various hefty brokers because the sufferer is unable to drive it home to them with a good cuff and a blow! The poor "Professor" could only cast dismayed glances around him. Anguish rang in his voice when with his poor old eyes fixed on his tormentor, and clawing at his chest convulsively, he muttered: "My heart ... they tear my heart with a hook, my very heart!"

Most probably he longed to convey how deeply these yells cut into his heart; but it was just this reaction of his that afforded sport to the idle and bored townsmen. The poor "Professor" would hurry away, his head dropped even lower as though to avert a blow; he was followed with peals of satisfied guffaws, and through the air like a whip-lash rang the teasing cry: "Knives, scissors, pins and needles!"

Credit should be given to the outcasts for standing staunchly by one another. Should *Pan* Turkevich and a couple of his tramps, or, better still, the retired artillery officer Zausailov, descend upon the crowd when they taunted the "Professor", many of the jokers would get very rough handling. Of towering height, with a purple nose and fierce protruding eyes, Zausailov had long ago declared open war on all living creatures, allowing no truce or neutrality. Whenever he caught town loafers abusing the "Professor", there was no end to his fierce vociferation. He would run wild in the streets, like Tamerlane destroying all that came his way. He might thus be said to have engaged in pogroms against the Jews long before they were launched on a wide scale. He inflicted all sorts of tortures on the Jews he captured, and abused foully the Jewish ladies. Generally the escapades of this dashing soldier ended with his being dragged to the police station, after a desperate battle with the policemen, in which both parties showed much valour.

Another person, the spectacle of whose misfortunes and downfall afforded a great deal of amusement to the townspeople was

Lavrovsky, a former civil servant, who had become a drunk of the lowest order. The days when Lavrovsky walked about in a uniform with brass buttons, wore the sprucest and brightest of neckties, and was addressed as "Pan clerk", were still remembered by the townsfolk. But this only added spice to the spectacle of his present sorry plight. The change which affected *Pan* Lavrovsky's life was brought about abruptly—by the arrival in Knyazhe-Veno of a brilliant officer of the dragoons whom it took only a fortnight's stay in the town to win the heart of the rich innkeeper's fair-haired daughter and elope with her. Lavrovsky still had his spruce neckties, but gone was the hope which brightened this petty official's life. And now he had given up service long ago, abandoning in some small town his parents whose hope and support he had once been, and shaking off all responsibility. In those rare moments when he was sober he would pass quickly through the streets, crestfallen, with averted gaze, crushed, as it were, by the disgrace of his own existence. Ragged, unkempt, with his long, tangled hair, he was a conspicuous figure attracting

everybody's attention; but he walked on, as it seemed, seeing no one, hearing nothing. Seldom only would he cast puzzled glances around him showing his bewilderment at what these strange and unfamiliar people might want of him. What had he done to them to make them taunt him so? At such moments of lucid thought, when his ear caught the name of the young lady with the fair-haired braid, a mad fury rose in his heart, his eyes blazed in his pale face with sinister flame, and he threw himself upon the crowd, which immediately took flight. Such outbursts, rare though they were, served only to further provoke the curious and bored idlers; they followed Lavrovsky whenever he passed through the streets, his eyes cast down, and, failing to rouse him out of his apathy, hurled mud and stones at him.

When he was drunk, Lavrovsky assiduously sought out dark corners behind fences, puddles that never dried, and other such haunts where he might count on remaining unobserved. There he would sit, his long legs stretched out, and his chin resting on his chest. Seclusion and the liquor roused in him a flow of confidences, the desire to talk of the grief

that burdened his soul, and he set off on a rambling tale of his wasted young life. He seemed to be speaking to the grey palings of the decrepit fence, to the birch whispering understanding words above his head and to the hopping magpies drawn with fishwife curiosity to that dark, half-still figure.

Should any of us young boys succeed in tracking him down in such a condition, we would quietly surround him and with beating hearts listen to his tales of horror. Our hair stood on end, and we eyed with terror this grey-faced man, who ascribed to himself a multitude of crimes. According to Lavrovsky he had killed his own father, sent his mother to the grave, starved his sisters and brothers. We had no reason not to believe these staggering confessions. What troubled us, however, was that Lavrovsky seemed to have had several fathers, for he had stabbed the heart of one with a sword, slowly poisoned another, and drowned a third in deep waters. With awe and sympathy, we went on listening, until Lavrovsky's speech grew more and more slurred, he became utterly unintelligible, and blissful slumber finally put a stop to his remorseful outpourings.

Older people laughed at us for believing his tales, and assured us that Lavrovsky's parents had died of hunger and disease in the course of time. But we, with our childish hearts, felt how sincere was his grief and remorse and, for all our credulity, we had a better understanding of his wasted life.

When his head sank on his breast and he fell asleep, wheezing, snoring, and then suddenly sobbing nervously, we gathered more closely around him, and peered into his face. Across it, even in sleep, seemed to flit dark shadows of his heinous deeds. The brows twitched, and the lips quivered almost like a child's when it is going to cry.

"I—I'll kill you!" he would suddenly cry out, feeling perhaps worried in his sleep by our presence. Whereupon we would scamper away in fear.

More than once, while sleeping thus, he had been drenched with rain, powdered with dust, or, in the autumn, half-buried beneath the snow. He might have doubtlessly perished if he had not been saved by just such other wretches as he was himself and, first and foremost, by the merry *Pan* Turkevich, who sought him out, himself reeling on his feet, shook him till

he was awake, set him upon his legs, and marched him off to their quarters.

Unlike the "Professor" and Lavrovsky who suffered meekly *Pan* Turkevich belonged to that group of people who do not permit others "to spit into their porridge", as he put it himself. And Turkevich was a merry fellow who had a comparatively easy time of it. To begin with he decided to call himself General, and insisted on the townspeople paying him the due respects; as nobody dared to question his right to the rank he soon thoroughly believed in it. He used to strut about the town majestically, scowling fearfully and quite prepared to punch somebody in the nose, which daring feat he seemed to consider one of the prerogatives of his rank. Should any doubts concerning his rank visit his untroubled head he speedily resolved them by stopping the first person he met in the street and inquiring in a bullying voice:

"Who do the people here say I am—eh?"

"General Turkevich!" was the meek answer, given by the apprehensive townsman. Whereupon Turkevich dismissed him, saying haughtily as he twirled his moustache: "There!"

He had a most impressive way of twirling his bristly moustache, and if it be added that he was never short of a clever retort or joke, it would be clear why he was always surrounded by crowds of idle listeners. Indeed, the doors of the town's best restaurant, in whose billiard room assembled visiting squires, were open to him. True, there were occasions when *Pan* Turkevich would be sent flying out of there with a good and fast kick. But since such occurrences merely pointed to the squires' lack of appreciation for humour, they did not affect Turkevich's spirits; a brimming self-confidence was natural to him, as was also intoxication.

This latter afforded him his second kick out of life. A single glassful of spirits would put him in a good temper for the rest of the day, the reason being that he had drunk such enormous quantities of brandy that his very blood fermented alcohol, and all he needed was a little addition of the drink to keep the process going with the froth and the bubble that made the world around him glow with the most pleasant colours.

But if for some reason the General had been obliged to forego his glass of brandy

for two or more days, he suffered untold tortures. On such occasions the mighty warrior became sad and low-spirited, and as helpless as a babe, which gave his enemies a chance to revenge themselves on him for his past offences. He was beaten, spat upon, stamped into mud, and he bore it all meekly, sobbing with the tears streaming down his moustaches, and loudly beseeching his tormentors to kill him outright, because he was sure anyway to die under a hedge like a dog. Strange to say, at this juncture, even his fiercest persecutors felt compelled to stop and leave, because they could not bear to see his face, nor hear the voice of this unfortunate who had suddenly become aware of his own wretched state. But then another phase began: the General's whole aspect changed; he became frightful to look at, with burning eyes, sunken cheeks, and hair standing on end. He proceeded to march through the streets, striking himself on the breast and proclaiming in a booming voice:

"I'm going forth like the prophet Jeremiah to chastise the wicked!"

A spectacle worth seeing was now in the offing. It must be said to his credit that

Pan Turkevich was, if anything, a past master of speaking up about things in our town. Little wonder, therefore, that now even the busiest and gravest of the citizens left off work and joined the crowd that followed around the new prophet, or at any rate watched his antics from a distance. He generally first betook himself to the home of the Secretary of the District Court of Justice, and with the help of a few willing actors whom he chose from the crowd, staged in front of the windows a kind of mock show of the sitting of the Court, acting all the different parts himself, and mimicking the voice and manner of the parties to perfection. As he never failed to drop now and then an allusion to certain facts or occurrences which had already been an avid topic of town gossip, and as he was, besides, very knowledgeable in legal matters, it is not at all astonishing that in a very short time the Secretary's cook would come running out of the house, thrust something into Turkevich's hand, and vanish hurriedly to escape the polite attentions of the General's suite. Having got his reward, he showed the coin to the watchers and with

scornful laughter betook himself to the nearest pub.

After his thirst had been somewhat assuaged, he led his followers to the houses of those involved in a suite, slightly altering his "repertoire" each time, according to circumstances. And as he pocketed a fee after each performance, he gradually softened, his eyes became oily, the ends of his moustache curled upwards, and the drama was changed into a comic piece. The last act was usually played out before the house of the chief of police Kotz. This worthy was the kindest-hearted of all the headmen of the town, but he unfortunately possessed two slight weaknesses—the habit of dyeing his hair black, and a preference for plump cooks. In all other matters he relied on the will of the Lord and the gratitude of the citizenry. As the crowd drew near his house which faced the street, Turkevich, after winking to his followers, threw his cap into the air, and proclaimed in a loud voice that the master of the house was not his superior but rather his father and benefactor.

Whereupon he would fix his eyes on the window in silent expectation. The results were as a rule twofold: sometimes

Matryona, the fat rosy cook, would come running out of the front door with a gift from his "father and benefactor", but at other times the door remained closed, there was a glimpse of a sulky, old man with coal-black hair at the window, and Matryona, slipping out of the back door, made her way to the police station to call the policeman Mikita who had plenty of practice in tackling Turkevich. Mikita gravely laid aside the boot he was mending, and rose to go.

Meanwhile, Turkevich, seeing that all his blandishments got him nowhere, would gradually change to a tone of satire. He began to attack his benefactor's most sensitive points—first he said he regretted the sad fact that his benefactor should think it necessary to dye his hair with boot black, then seeing his words had no effect, he went on in a louder tone of voice to charge his benefactor with setting a poor example to the citizenry by his illicit cohabitation with Matryona. Once having touched on this delicate subject, Turkevich knew that for him to come to any terms with his benefactor was now past all hope, and for this reason perhaps he waxed more eloquent than ever. However, it was

at this point that he was sure to be interrupted; Kotz's angry and jaundiced face would show at the window, and the policeman Mikita, who had come up softly from behind, pin Turkevich's arms in a grip of iron. No one of the listeners even tried to warn the speaker, for Mikita's stalking was a delight for them to watch. Interrupted in the middle of a word, Turkevich now somersaulted strangely in the air and after landing on Mikita's shoulders was carried bodily off by the policeman to the station in front of the excited crowd. The black gate gawked and the helplessly kicking "General" vanished into its darkness. With cheers for Mikita the ungrateful crowd finally dispersed.

Besides these more notable individuals, there huddled on the hill quite a few ragged outcasts whose appearance on the marketplace made the alarmed market women cover up their wares with their arms as a hen covers its chicks at the sight of a hawk in the sky. Rumour had it that these unfortunates, deprived of all means of subsistence since their expulsion from the castle, had united into a close-knit group, which engaged among other things in petty thievery in the town and its

environs. The rumour was grounded in the undeniable truth that no human being can subsist without food. And since most of these shady individuals had in one way or another fallen out with the ordinary ways of obtaining it, and had been cut off by the lucky ones at the castle from recourse to the boons of local charity, the inevitable conclusion to be drawn was that they either had to steal or die. They did not die, ergo ... the very fact of their existing became proof of their having strayed from the righteous path.

If this were true, then it could not be disputed that the organiser and leader of this community was *Pan* Tyburcy Drub, the most remarkable personality of all the queer characters driven out of the castle.

Pan Tyburcy's origins were shrouded in the most obscure mystery. Persons of imagination claimed that he was of aristocratic lineage, but had so dishonoured his name that he had been forced into hiding. It was said, too, that he had shared in the exploits of the legendary Karmeliuk. For one thing, his age belied that, and, for another, there was nothing of the aristocrat in *Pan* Tyburcy's appearance. He was a tall man, with a

pronounced stoop that seemed to speak of the many misfortunes which had weighed heavily on Tyburcy's shoulders. He had prominent, coarse but expressive features, and short, stubbly, reddish hair. His low brow, protruding jaw, and mobile facial muscles reminded one somehow of a monkey. But the eyes which shone from under his bushy brows had a grim and stubborn look, and bespoke a sly humour, keen perception, energy and an astute mind. His face twisted and contorted into many grimaces, but his eyes never changed their expression. It was that, I believe, that lent such grisly fascination to this strange man's grimacing. I sensed beneath it the rippling of a deep unending melancholy.

Pan Tyburcy's hands were rough and calloused, and he set down his big feet with the heavy tread of a *muzhik.* On these grounds, most of the townspeople disbelieved the rumour of his aristocratic lineage. They could at most concede to his having served at the manor of some noted Polish squire. But there arose a difficulty—how then explain his extraordinary learning, which nobody could deny? There was not a pub in all the town in which *Pan*

Tyburcy had not, with a view to edifying the Ukrainian peasants gathered for a drink on market days, regaled them with whole orations from Cicero, or chapters from Xenophon, delivered from the top of a wine barrel. The Ukrainian peasants gaped and poked one another's ribs, as *Pan* Tyburcy, his tattered figure enthroned above the crowd, flayed Catiline, or held forth on the glorious deeds of Caesar, or the treachery of Mithridates. Richly gifted with imagination, the Ukrainian folk read meaning of their own into those ardent, if incomprehensible addresses.... When, striking his fist upon his chest, and flashing his eyes, he addressed them as *"Patres conscripti",* they would, too, knit their brows, remarking to one another: "Just hear the son of the devil, the names he calls us!" And when, raising his eyes to the ceiling, he began reciting long Latin passages, his moustachioed listeners eyed him frightened but with sympathetic interest. It would seem to them at such times that Tyburcy's soul was adrift in some unknown land, where this un-Christian tongue was spoken, and which, judging by the speaker's despairing gestures, was in the grip of some grievous

misfortunes. But the audience's sympathetic attention reached its peak when, rolling his eyes upwards and moving only the whites, Pan Tyburcy would proceed to a long and exasperating scanning of Virgil or Homer. He did this in such hollow, such sepulchral tones, that the more drunken of his listeners, in the corners of the room, would hang their heads, until their long forelocks fell over their eyes, and mumble mawkishly:

"Ah, he wrings the heart, may the deuce take him!" And the tears fell from their eyes and trickled down their drooping moustaches.

No wonder, that when Tyburcy sprang suddenly down from his barrel laughing heartily, the peasants' sad faces brightened, and their hands dived into the pockets of their wide trousers in search of coppers. Overjoyed at Tyburcy's safe return from his* tragic wanderings, they would embrace him, treat him to vodka; and coppers would shower, clinking, into his cap.

The extraordinary learning he seemed to possess led to a new supposition concerning this strange man's origins, one that would more suit the obvious facts. It

was thus agreed that as a boy *Pan* Tyburcy had been a serf in some count's manor; that he had been sent with the count's son to a Jesuit school, mainly to keep the young master's boots well polished; and that, while the young nobleman was being educated mainly by the Jesuit fathers' "discipline" of the rod, the boy serf had absorbed the wisdom intended for the young master.

Owing to the many mysteries that surrounded Tyburcy, excellent information on magic was ascribed to him among his other fields of knowledge. And when a wicked witch had sown tares in the ripening fields adjoining the last of the town's hovels, *Pan* Tyburcy had the power to pull them out with the least harm to himself or the reapers. And when a prophetic owl would alight at night on some roof calling down death with its loud hooting, *Pan* Tyburcy was again called to help and the bird of ill omen departed quickly, frightened away by a long chapter from Livy.

Nobody was able to tell where the children came from who lived with *Pan* Tyburcy. And yet there was the fact, indeed two facts, for there was a boy of six

or seven, tall and sharp for his age, and a little girl of three. The boy had been with *Pan* Tyburcy from the first time he showed up in the town. As to the little girl, she seemed to have been brought by him from some unknown parts, after his absence of several months from the town.

The boy was called Valek. He was tall and slim, with black hair, and at times he wandered aimlessly and gloomily about the town, his hands in his pockets, casting looks which terrified the women selling buns. The little girl was seen only once or twice in Tyburcy's arms. Then she disappeared, and no one could guess where she might be.

There was talk of some sort of underground vaults on the hill where the chapel stood. This talk was readily believed, for in these parts which saw the Tatars pass with fire and sword, the Polish nobles rise in mutiny and the reckless Haydamaks. *[Ukrainian rebels who rose against national and religious oppression. — Tr.]* wreak their bloody vengeance, such underground vaults were not rare

Moreover, surely the band of outcasts seen in the town sheltered somewhere, and it was always in the direction of the

chapel that they disappeared towards evening. There went the "Professor" hobbling sleepily along, and *Pan* Tyburcy with his fast, brisk stride; there, too, reeling, went *Pan* Turkevich, holding up the fierce-looking yet helpless Lavrovsky, and all the other shady characters who vanished into the twilight of the evening. And as they did so, there was no one bold enough to follow them up the clayey slopes, for the hill, with its sunken graves, had a bad name. Blue lights were seen in the old graveyard on chilly autumn nights, and the owls in the belfry screeched loud and shrill, putting fear in the heart of even our brave smith.

III.

MY FATHER AND I

"A pity, young sir, a pity!" old Janusz from the castle would say, when he met me in the streets following Turkevich or listening to *Pan* Tyburcy's orations.

And the old man would shake his head dolefully.

"You have got into bad company.... What a pity that the son of such worthy parents should not hold dear the family honour."

And indeed, since the day our mother died, and my father's gloomy face grew more sombre, I was seldom in the house. On summer nights I would return home late making my way through the orchard. Stealthily as a wolf-cub, careful to avoid my father, and using a special contrivance I had made to pry open my window, half-hidden behind thick lilac bushes, I would slip quietly into my bedroom. If my sister was awake in her crib in the adjoining room, I would go there, and we would play

sweetly and quietly, trying not to awake her cross old nurse.

In the early morning, when all the world was still asleep, I was already up. I would run through the tall, thick, dewy grass, climb over the orchard fence and go either to the pond where my buddies, scamps like myself, were waiting for me with their fishing rods; or to the mill, where I could see the yawning miller open the sluices, and the smooth water would quiver and then rush upon the wheels to merrily start out on a new day's work.

The big wheels, wakened by the loud jostling of the water, would quiver in their turn—yielding reluctantly at first, as though too lazy to get down to work. But, in a matter of seconds, they would be turning fast, spattering foam and bathing in the cool current. Then the heavy shafts would slowly and staidly come into motion. Inside the mill gears began to rumble, and the millstones to hum, and white clouds of flour dust would stream out of all the cracks of the old millhouse.

Then I roamed on. I liked to watch the awakening of nature, delighting when I startled a tardy lark or frightened a cowardly hare out of his furrow. Dewdrops

fell from the clover and wild flower tops when I made my way across the fields to the wood on the town's outskirts. The trees greeted me with a sleepy whispering. At that hour the prisoners' pale, sullen faces were not yet visible behind the grated windows of the prison; but the new guards, their guns clattering as they circled the walls, had already come on duty to relieve the night watch.

Long as I would be on my tour of inspection, on returning through the streets, I would find the yawning townspeople only just opening their shutters. Presently the sun would come out from behind the hill; a clamorous bell beyond the ponds would summon the schoolboys to their lessons; and hunger would drive me home to breakfast.

Every one called me a vagabond and a good-for-nothing. I was so often upbraided for the most varied evil inclinations that in time I myself came to believe I possessed them. My father believed that, too, and tried, at times, to give me guidance. However, nothing came of these attempts. At the sight of his stern and clouded face, with the mark of hopeless grief upon it, I would quail and withdraw into myself. I

would stand there before him, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, fidgeting, my eyes roving from place to place. There were moments when something stirred in my breast; I longed for him to put his arms around me, to take me on his knees and be kind to me. I would then have pressed my head against his heart, and perhaps we might have wept together—child and stern man—for our common loss. But he regarded me with misted eyes that seemed to peer over my head into the distance, and I would recoil from that gaze, which I could not understand.

"Do you remember Mother?"

Did I remember Mother? Oh, yes, I remembered her. I remembered how, waking at night, I had felt in the dark for her soft hands, held them tight, and covered them with kisses. I remembered how in the last year of her life, sitting ill at the open window, she gazed sadly at the beauty of spring, bidding farewell to it.

Oh, yes, I remembered her! When she lay, so young and beautiful, covered with flowers, with the seal of death on her pale face. I drew away into a corner like a miserable pup, and stared at her with

smarting eyes—confronted for the first time with the horrible riddle of life and death. She was carried off among a crowd of unfamiliar people. It was then that through the dusk of the first night of my orphanhood broke the moan of my suppressed sobbing.

Truly I remembered her.... Now, too, I would wake often in the dead of night, my childish heart brimming and overflowing with love—wake with a happy smile, imagining in the blissful ignorance of my childish dreams that her gentle presence was with me as before, that she would stroke and caress me. But the hands I stretched out met with only the empty darkness, and the bitterness of my orphanhood rent my heart. I would then press my hands against my small, anguished, fluttering heart and hot flowing tears scorched my cheeks.

Yes, I remembered her! But when this tall, gloomy man in whom I so longed to feel a kindred soul, but could not, asked me the question, I would retire still more into myself, and gently release my hand from his grip.

He would then turn away, distressed and hurt, feeling that he had not the

slightest influence on me, and that a wall stood between us. When she was alive, he hardly noticed me, so overwhelming was his love for her. Now that she was dead, his grief shut him off from me.

And the gulf between us grew wider and deeper. He persuaded himself more and more that I was a bad, hard-hearted and selfish boy. The consciousness that he was failing in his fatherly duty to me, that he could find no real love for me in his heart, still further alienated him from me. I felt this well enough. I watched him sometimes from behind the bushes, as he strode up and down our orchard paths— faster and faster—uttering loud moans in his anguish. My heart would throb with sympathy and compassion. Once, when, clutching his head and dropping onto a bench, he broke into sobs, I could not stay in the bushes and ran up to him, impelled by some vague but powerful feeling. But, at the sight of me, my father, shaken out of his sad and bitter reverie, cast me a stern look and asked coldly:

"What do you want?"

I wanted nothing. I turned quickly away, ashamed of my impulse, afraid lest he guessed what I felt. Running to a far

corner of the orchard, I dropped into the grass and wept in bitter anguish.

From the age of six I knew the horror of loneliness.

Sonya, my sister, was only four. I loved her dearly and she, too, felt the same love for me. But my being regarded an inveterate rogue put up a barrier between us. Every time I started to play with Sonya, noisily and boisterously as was my way, her old nurse, always sleepy, always dozing over the feathers she was forever plucking, would wake up at once, quickly pick up Sonya and carry her off into the house, glaring at me as she went. At such times, she reminded me of a mother hen in a flurry of fright, and I saw myself as the wicked hawk and Sonya the little chick. A bitter feeling of resentment possessed me, and, naturally enough, I gave up all attempt of engaging Sonya in my offensive games. Before long I began to feel cramped in the house, and in the orchard, where no one ever had a kind word for me. It was then that my roaming began. My whole being thrilled with a new expectancy, the opening up of life before me. I felt there was something in store for me in that great big unknown world

outside our orchard fence. I felt, too, that there was something I would and could do, but had no idea what it was; meanwhile, an impulse, tantalising and challenging, rose from the bottom of my heart to meet the mysterious unknown. In anticipation of the puzzle resolving itself, I instinctively made my escape from my old nurse with her endless feathers, from the lazy familiar whisper of the apple-trees in our little orchard, and from the senseless clatter of knives mincing meat in the kitchen. In addition to all my other unflattering names I was now called a "street urchin" and a "tramp". But I did not care; I had become inured to reproaches, receiving them much as I might a sudden downpour of rain or a spell of sultry heat. I listened to them glumly and continued doing as I pleased. I wandered about the town, eyeing with childish curiosity its tumbledown houses, and observing the uncomplicated pattern of its life. Out on the highway, I would listen to the hum of the telegraph wires, trying to guess what news they carried from the big cities far away; or, perhaps, to the rustle of the wheat in the fields; or the whisper of the wind over the high mounds of the old Haydamak graves.

Again and again I would stop short to look wide-eyed and morbidly frightened at the scenes laid open before me. Face after face, impression after impression, were planted in my mind. I saw and learned many things that children far older have little chance to learn. At the same time, as before, my childish heart went on throbbing in anticipation of something unknown and the throb was repeated defiant, tantalising and mysterious.

When the old hags had robbed the castle of the fascination it had for me, and I lost my reverence for it, when I had come to know every corner of the town, down to the very last of its dirty lanes, my gaze turned upon the chapel on the hill. At first, like some timid creature of the woods, I tried the approaches to the hill from every side, wanting to climb it, but was held off by its bad name. Inspecting the hillside I could see nothing but silent graves and crumbling crosses. There was not the slightest sign of human habitation or activity. The impression was of a place, tame, peaceful, empty, and abandoned. The solitary chapel stood frowning with its gaping windows, as though deep in sad meditation. And I now had the urge to

examine it closely, to look inside, to convince myself that there was nothing there but dust. Afraid to undertake such a raid alone, and realising I might well need help, I recruited from among the street boys I knew a little band of three daredevils, promising them the reward of buns and apples from our orchard.

IV.

I MAKE NEW FRIENDS

We set out one afternoon, and were soon climbing the steep clayey side of the hill, deeply furrowed by the spade of the gravedigger, and by spring torrents. Here and there, so „much of the soil was washed away, that white, crumbling bones protruded from open graves. In one place, we saw the corner of a wooden coffin; in another, a grinning human skull.

Helping each other across the pits, we climbed as fast as we could, and at length we reached the top of the hill. The sun was

just beginning to sink westward. Its slanting rays softly gilded the green grass in the old cemetery, played on the crooked crosses, and on the few unbroken panes in the windows of the chapel. It was very quiet. A tranquillity and utter peace hung over the abandoned graveyard. We did not see any skulls there, nor bones, nor open coffins. The grass grew fresh and green in a smooth carpet slightly inclined towards the town below, and it gently veiled in its embrace the horror and ugliness of death.

We were alone, except for the busy sparrows and the swallows,» darting soundlessly in and out at the chapel windows. The old chapel stood plunged in sadness, amid the grass-grown graves, humble crosses, and the half-decayed stone tombs. These tombs, too, were covered with green grass dotted with buttercups, clover, and violets.

"There's nobody around," one of my companions said.

"The sun's coming down," another added, with a glance at the sky. The sun was not really setting, but it hung low over the distant hill.

We found the door of the chapel firmly boarded up and the windows were very

high. However, with the help of my chums, I hoped to reach a window, and take a look inside.

"Don't," one of them cried, losing his courage, and gripped my arm.

But another, the eldest in our little party, with a scornful "you, cowardly ninny", pushed him away, and willingly bent his back for me to climb.

Fearing nothing, I climbed onto his back. Then he straightened up, and I planted my feet on his shoulders. From this height, I could easily reach the window frame. It proved strong enough to hold me; I swung up and seated myself on the window-sill.

"What's inside?" my chums demanded eagerly.

I did not answer. Leaning over the sill, I had looked in and was awed into silence by the solemn stillness of the abandoned chapel. The inside of this tall, tapering structure, was bare of all ornament. The evening sunlight, streaming freely through the paneless windows, traced patterns of bright gold upon the old peeling walls. I could now see the inside of the barred door: there were broken-down galleries and mouldy columns that seemed to

stagger under a weight they could no longer support. The corners were entwined in cobweb, and wrapped in that shadowy gloom that is wont to settle in the corners of all such old buildings. There seemed to be a much greater drop from the window to the floor than to the grass outside. It was as though I was looking down into a deep pit. Only after a while could I make out several objects of queer shape dimly outlined on the shadowy floor.

My chums grew tired of waiting for word from me, and one of them, climbing up just as I had done, drew up beside me, clinging to the jamb for support.

After peering long at a curious shapeless object on the floor, he remarked, "That's the altar."

"And that's a chandelier."

"There's the Gospel stand."

"What's that over there?" asked my friend curiously, pointing to a dark object lying near the altar.

"A priest's hat."

"No, it's a pail."

"What would a pail be doing there?"

"They might have kept the charcoal for the censer in it."

"No, I tell you, it's a hat. You can take a look, if you like. We can tie a belt to the window frame and you can slide down it."

"I won't! Go yourself, if you like."

"And I will, too. Do you think I'm scared?"

"Go ahead, then."

Acting on my word, I tied both of our belts tightly together, looped one end round the window frame and gave it to my friend to hold, and lowered myself down the other end into the chapel. I shuddered when my foot touched the floor, but a glance at the friendly face looking down at me restored my courage. The click of my heels echoed loudly through the empty chapel, resounding under the ceiling and in the dark corners. Some sparrows were startled out of their shelter in the galleries and darted out through a big hole in the roof. All at once, I saw looking down at me from the wall beside the window on which I had perched, a stern, bearded face, crowned with a wreath of thorns. The face belonged to a huge crucifix, reaching almost to the ceiling.

Fear gripped me. My chum's eyes, from above, shone with breathless curiosity and sympathy.

"Will you go over and see?" he asked in a half-whisper.

"Yes," I replied in the same hushed tone. But just then something unexpected happened.

We heard the clatter of falling plaster, up on one of the galleries, and a stir which sent a cloud of dust into the air. Then we saw a big grey hulk thrash out from a dark corner. It was a huge owl we had disturbed by our voices. As it hovered towards a hole in the roof, it blocked the patch of blue sky, and for a moment it seemed to grow darker in the chapel. The next instant it was gone, disappearing through that hole.

Frantic fear gripped me.

"Pull up!" I cried to my chum, seizing hold of the belt.

"In a minute, don't be afraid," he returned comfortingly, preparing to pull me up into the light of day.

But all at once his face contorted with terror, and, with a frightened cry, he dropped out of sight, jumping off the window. Instinctively, I looked behind me. What I saw was strange, indeed, but it surprised rather than frightened me.

The shadowy object of our debate, which had actually turned out to be neither hat nor pail, but an earthen pot, now flashed through the air and, before my gaze, disappeared under the altar. I did, however, glimpse the hand that held it—a small hand that looked like a child's.

My sensations of the moment are hard to describe. I suffered nothing painful, and the feeling I experienced could hardly be called fear. It was as though I was not in this world. And from somewhere, positively from another world, my ear caught for a while the rapid, frightened patter of two pairs of running feet. Shortly the silence was restored, I remained alone, entombed, as it were, in consequence of some strange and inexplicable happenings.

I had lost all sense of time, and could not say how long it was before I heard voices whispering under the altar.

"Why doesn't he climb out again?"

"He's scared, can't you see?"

The first voice seemed to belong to a very small child, the second to a boy about my age. I thought, too, that I had caught the gleam of a pair of black eyes looking at me through a crack in the altar.

"What'll he do now?" asked the first voice, whispering again.

"We'll soon find out," replied the older voice.

There were sounds of movement. The altar seemed to quake, and, presently, from under it, a figure popped out.

This was a boy of about nine, taller than me, but thin as a reed. He wore a grimy shirt, and he stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of his short, tight trousers. His hair, dark and curly, hung tangled over his black, pensive eyes.

Appear as he did in so startling and strange a way, and approach me with the careless, cocky air the boys around our marketplace assumed when they were spoiling for fight, for all that, I was immensely relieved at the sight of him. And I felt even greater relief, when behind him from under the altar, or rather from the trap-door in the floor, which was screened by the altar, there showed a smudgy little face, framed in fair hair, with blue eyes that sparkled at me with childish curiosity.

I moved forward a little, away from the wall, and, true to the chevalier rules of our marketplace, too, thrust my hands into my

pockets. This was a stance to show that I had no fear of my antagonist, indeed, that I held him more or less in contempt.

We faced one another, and our eyes met for an instant. Looking me up and down, the boy demanded:

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing," I replied. "What's it to you?"

His shoulder shot up, as though he were going to draw his hand out of his pocket and sock me one.

I held my ground.

"I'll show you!" he threatened.

I stuck out my chest.

"Just you try!"

It was a crucial moment: on it depended the further turn of relations between us. I stood waiting, but the boy, still watching me closely, made no further move.

"I can show you, too," I said, but rather more peaceably.

All the while, the little girl behind him had been trying to climb out from the trap-door; she lifted herself up by grasping its edges with her little hands, fell back again and again, then finally succeeded, and came toddling unsteadily towards the boy. Reaching him, she huddled up close to him

with a firm clasp, and cast me a glance of mingled wonder and fear.

That settled it; the boy could not fight with the child hanging on to him like that, and I was not ignoble enough to take advantage of the situation.

"What's your name?" he asked me, stroking the little girl's fair hair.

"Vasya, what's yours?"

"Valek. I know who you are. You live in the house up above the pond, and you've the biggest apples in your orchard."

"Yes, we have—the finest apples! Would you like some?"

I took two apples out of my pocket—they had been part of the reward promised the chums that had so shamefully deserted me—and offered one to Valek, and the other to the little girl. But she only clung closer to Valek, hiding her face against him.

"She's afraid," he said, taking the apple and handing it to her himself.

Then, turning back to me, he asked, "What made you come here? I've never gone and climbed into your orchard, have I?"

"Why don't you! I'd be glad if you came," I replied cordially.

The answer seemed to puzzle Valek. He thought a little, and said ruefully:

"I'm no company for you."

"Why not?" I demanded, genuinely distressed by his rueful tone.

"Your father's the judge."

"Well, what of it?" I asked in genuine surprise. "You'll be playing with me, not my father."

Valek shook his head.

"Tyburcy wouldn't let me," he said. And as though the name had signalled something to him, went on hurriedly, "Look here, you seem to be a good sort, only just the same you'd better go. There's sure to be trouble, if Tyburcy finds you here."

I agreed that I had better be going. The last rays of sunlight were fading away from the chapel window, and it was a good distance back to town.

"How can I get out of here?"

"I'll show you the road. We'll go out together."

"She, too?" I poked my finger at our tiny lady.

"Marusya? Yes, she'll come, too."

"What? Through the window?"

Valek paused to think.

"No, here's what we'll do. I'll help you up on the window, and Marusya and I will go out by another way."

With my new friend's help, I got up on the window-sill, untied my belt, and looped it over the window frame. I lowered myself down with both ends in my hands, and was soon dangling in the air. Then I let go of one end, dropped to the ground, and jerked the belt free. Valek and Marusya were already outside at the wall, waiting for me.

The sun had just set behind the hill. And the town lay mantled in violet shadow. Only the tops of the poplars on the island still gleamed red gold, tinged by the last rays of sunlight. I now had a feeling that a whole day, if not more, had gone by since I had come up the hill to the old graveyard, and that whatever happened belonged to yesterday.

"How good it feels!" I cried, breathing deep of the fresh evening coolness, and exhilarated by it.

"It's dull here," Valek remarked wistfully.

"Is this where you live?" I asked when we were climbing down the hillside.

"Yes."

"But where is your house, then?"

I could not imagine children like myself not living in "houses".

Valek smiled in his sad way, but did not answer. We did not go down by the pitted slope I had climbed, but by a better way that Valek knew. It took us through the reeds of a dried-up marsh, across a little stream by a bridge of thin planks, and down to the flat land at the foot of the hill.

Here we paused to say good-bye. After shaking hands with my new chum, I turned to the little girl. She gave me her tiny hand, and looking up at me with her blue eyes, asked:

"Will you come again?"

"I will," I replied. "I certainly will."

"Well, I suppose you could," said Valek thoughtfully. "Only pick a time when our people are down in town."

'"Your people?' Who's that?"

"Why, the whole lot—Tyburcy, Lavrovsky, Turkevich. And the 'Professor'... but I don't believe he matters much."

"Very well, I'll come when I see them in town. Good-bye, then."

I had gone a few steps, when Valek called after me: "Wait a minute! You won't

go telling anybody that you were here, will you?"

"I won't tell a soul," I replied assuredly.

"That's fine! And if those fools of friends of yours begin asking questions, tell them you saw the devil."

"I'll do that."

"So long, then."

"So long."

A deep dusk had settled upon Knyazhe-Veno, when I approached our orchard fence. A faint narrow sickle of the new moon hung over the castle, and the stars had come ablaze. I was just going to climb the fence, when someone gripped my hand.

It was the boy who had run off. "Vasya, chum," he spoke in a hushed, ruffled voice. "How did you get out?... Poor fellow!..."

"I got out, as you see. But all of you ran away and left me."

He seemed ashamed. However, curiosity got the better of shame, and he asked:

"What was it, in there?"

"What was it? Devils, of course," I replied most positively. "And you're a bunch of cowards."

And, shaking off my embarrassed chum, I scrambled up the fence.

In another fifteen minutes I was sound asleep, dreaming of real devils that came merrily hopping out of the trap-door. Valek chased after them with a willow broom, and Marusya, her blue eyes sparkling gleefully, laughed and clasped her hands.

V.

OUR FRIENDSHIP GROWS

From that time on, I was wholly absorbed by my new friends. Morning, noon, and night I could think of nothing else except my next visit to the hill. I had but one purpose now in loitering about the streets: to make sure that all those whom Janusz had described as "bad company" were down in town. And if I found Lavrovsky sprawled in a muddy puddle, Turkevich and Tyburcy orating in their usual haunts, and other shady characters of their crowd poking about the marketplace, I would hurry off at once across the marsh and up the hill to the

chapel, my pockets full of apples, which I was allowed to pick to my heart's content in our orchard, and with sweets I saved for my new friends.

Valek, level-headed, and with grown-up ways that I rather respected, would accept these offerings as a matter of course, putting away the greater part of his share for his sister. But Marusya threw up her tiny hands, her eyes dancing with delight, her pale cheeks glowing with colour, and laughed happily. Her laughter echoed in our hearts, rewarding us for the sweets we denied ourselves to give her.

She was a pale, slight child, much like a flower grown without sunlight. Though four years old, she could hardly walk, but waddled along unsteadily on her short, rickety legs, swaying like a grassblade. Her arms were thin, almost transparent, and her head lolled on her skinny neck, like a bluebell on its stalk. Her eyes, at times, gazed at you with an unchildlike sadness, and her smile so reminded me of my mother in her waning days—in the chair by the window, with the breeze fluttering her fair hair—that I would grow sad myself and tears pricked my eyes.

I could not help but compare her with my sister. They were about the same age—but Sonya was as chubby as a cherub and bouncy as a ball. She could run so fast, in the heat of play, laughed so ringingly; and she wore the prettiest little frocks, with a bright red ribbon plaited into her dark braids by our maid.

As to my new little friend, she hardly ever ran, and very seldom laughed; and when she did laugh, it was like the tiniest of silver bells, not to be heard more than a few steps away. She wore a soiled, shabby dress, and there never was a ribbon in her braids. Her hair, though, was far thicker and more beautiful than Sonya's. Valek, to my surprise, was extremely adept at braiding it, which he did every morning for her.

I was a brisk and zestful youngster. "That boy's got quicksilver in his limbs," my elders would say of me. I believed them, though I had no idea by whom and how this operation had been performed. At the outstart, I was my usual sprightly self in the company of my hew friends. I don't believe the old chapel had ever echoed to such shouts as mine, when I tried to put some spirit into Valek and Marusya, and

draw them into play. But I had little success. Valek would look gravely from me to the little girl, and once, when I tried to make her run, he said:

"Don't! She's going to cry."

True enough, after I had got her to run, and when she heard me running after her, Marusya suddenly stopped and turned to face me, raising her arms above her head as though in defence. And, throwing at me the helpless glance of a trapped bird, she began to sob, leaving me utterly bewildered.

"You see," Valek said. "She doesn't like to play."

He sat her down on the grass, picked some flowers, and threw them into her lap. She stopped crying, and sat quietly fingering the flowers, whispering to the golden buttercups and lifting the bluebells to her lips. Subdued, I lay down in the grass closeby, with Valek.

"Why is she like that?" I asked presently, pointing with my eyes at Marusya.

"Sad, you mean?" Valek said and replied, in an utterly convinced tone. "Well, you see, it's the fault of the grey stones."

"Ye-es," the little girl feebly echoed his words, "it's the fault of the grey stones."

"What grey stones?" I demanded perplexedly.

"The grey stones have sucked the life out of her," Valek explained, as he lay on his back looking up at the sky. "That's what Tyburcy says.... Tyburcy knows it all."

"Ye-es," once again the little girl echoed softly. "Tyburcy always knows."

I could make nothing of this puzzling explanation Valek gave, but the argument supporting it—that Tyburcy "always knew"—duly impressed me. Raising myself on my elbow, I eyed Marusya. She sat just as Valek had sat her down, and was still playing with the flowers. Her thin hands moved listlessly. The eyes against the pale face looked even bluer under their drooping lashes. The sight of that tiny, sorrowful little figure, somehow brought home to me the bitter truth of Tyburcy's words, though their entire meaning still escaped me. Yes, surely something was sucking the life out of that queer little girl, who cried when other little girls would laugh. And, yet, how could stones have such power?

This puzzle filled me with more dread than the phantoms of the castle. The Turkish prisoners, languishing under the island, and the terrifying old count, however fearful, after all, savoured of fairy tale, but here I had come up against something not only strange and weird, but real. There was something—shapeless, merciless, cruel and hard as stone—bearing down on the little girl, sucking the colour from her cheeks, the sparkle from her eyes, the energy from her body. "It must happen in the night," I thought, and a painful feeling of pity wrung my heart.

This feeling prompted me to restrain my own high spirits; I tried to fall in, like Valek did, with our little lady's sedate ways. We would settle her in the grass somewhere, and go picking flowers for her, collecting pretty pebbles, or catching butterflies. Sometimes we made brick traps for sparrows. And, sometimes, we would stretch out on the grass beside her, looking up at the clouds floating high over the shaggy chapel roof, and tell her stories, or just talk.

And, as one day followed another, these talks cemented our friendship, which grew steadily, despite the sharp difference of

our natures. I was impulsive and brimming with spirits; Valek was sober and restrained. There was an authority about him and an air of independence when he spoke of his elders, which I admired. Moreover, he made me think of many things which had never before occupied my mind. Hearing him speak of Tyburcy as he would of a comrade of his own age, I asked:

"Tyburcy is your father, isn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose so," he replied thoughtfully, as though the question had never occurred to him.

"Is he fond of you?"

"Oh, yes," he replied with greater assurance. "He's always worrying about me, and—you know—he kisses me sometimes, and cries...."

"He cares for me, too," Marusya put in with childish pride, "and he cries, too."

"My father doesn't care for me," I said ruefully. "He never kisses me. He's just no good."

"You're wrong there," Valek objected. "You don't understand. Tyburcy knows better. He says the judge is the very best man in the town, and that the town deserved long ago to go to its doom. But

there was your father, and then the priest, whom they got locked up in the monastery a short time ago, and there was, too, the rabbi. Owing to these three men..."

"What is there owing to them?"

"Owing to them the town has not gone to its doom yet. That's what Tyburcy says; it's because they stand up for the poor....And your father, do you know what he did? He decided a case against a count."

"Yes, that's true. The count was frightfully angry. I heard him."

"There! And to put a count in the wrong is no joke!"

"Why?"

"Why?" Valek paused to think a little. "Well, because a count is a person of importance. A count does whatever he pleases, and rides in a carriage, well, and a count has money. With another judge, he'd give him money, and the case would be decided in his favour, and against the moneyless man."

"I dare say you're right for I heard the count shout in our house—'I can buy you and sell you all!"

"And what did the judge say?"

"My father said to him: 'Get out of my house!'"

"There you are! That's what Tyburcy says—that the judge would not hesitate to throw a rich man out. And when old Ivanikha came to him, on her crutch, he called for a chair for her. That's what he's like. Even Turkevich makes no rows outside his windows."

It was true; during his expeditions of exposure in the town's streets, Turkevich would pass by our windows in silence, or on occasion even doff his cap.

I thought over deeply all that was said. Valek had shown me my father from an angle from which I had never viewed him before. Valek's words had touched a chord of filial pride deep in my heart. It pleased me to hear my father praised, the more so that the praise came from Tyburcy, who "always knew". My heart filled with aching love mingled with the bitter certainty that my father had never loved me, would never love me, as Tyburcy loved his children.

VI.

AMONG THE "GREY STONES"

Another few days went by, followed by a time when the "bad company" from the hill ceased coming to town. Feeling bored, I wandered through the streets, hoping to catch sight of them, so that I could hurry up the hill. The "Professor" alone passed through the town once or twice, wobbling alone dreamily, but neither Turkevich nor Tyburcy put in an appearance. I grew terribly lonesome, and could not bear to be deprived of the company of Valek and Marusya. At last, one day, as I walked crestfallen down a dusty street, Valek overtook me and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Why don't you come around any more?" he asked.

"I was afraid to come, because I didn't see your people in town."

"Oh, I see! Silly of me not to have let you know— they're away, and you may come. I thought it was something else."

"What did you think?"

"I thought you had got bored with us."

"Not at all—I'll go with you right away," I said hastily. "I've even got some apples with me."

My mention of the apples somehow made Valek start, and turn towards me quickly. He seemed on the point of saying something, but then thought better of it, only giving me a rather quizzical glance.

Seeing that I looked expectantly at him, he said evasively, "Oh, nothing! You go ahead to the hill; I've got to drop into a place—for a bit of business. I'll catch up with you soon enough."

I walked slowly, looking back every now and again to see if Valek was anywhere behind. But there was no sign of him, even when I had got all the way up the hill and almost reached the chapel. Here I paused, rather perplexed, for there seemed to be nothing before me but the graveyard, still and deserted, without the slightest evidence of human habitation. There were only the carefree chirping of the sparrows, and the rustle of the dark, dense foliage, where the thick growths of bird-cherry, lilac, and honeysuckle nestled close to the south wall of the chapel.

I looked around, and was somewhat at a loss where to turn. Obviously, I had best wait for Valek. And while I waited, I wandered about among the graves, eyeing them idly, and trying to decipher the half-obliterated inscriptions on the moss-grown tombstones. Thus roaming from grave to grave, I came upon a large, half-ruined tomb. On the ground, near it, lay its roof, torn off, most probably, by a violent wind. Its door was boarded up. Prompted by curiosity, I propped up an old cross against the wall of the tomb, climbed up with its help, and looked inside. The tomb was empty. But there was a window with glassed panes cut into the middle of its floor; through the panes gaped at me a black emptiness.

While I was atop the tomb, wondering at the purpose of this strange window, Valek came running uphill tired and breathless. He held in his hand a loaf of Jewish bread, and something bulged under his shirt. Perspiration was streaming down his face.

"Ho!" he cried when he saw me. "So that's where you are! Tyburcy would be good and mad, if he caught you there! Well, but there's no helping it now. I know

you're a good fellow. You won't tell anyone where we live. Come, let's go in."

"Where? Is it far?" I asked.

"You'll see in a minute. Keep right after me."

Parting the bushes where the honeysuckle and lilac grew, he slipped in among the greenery under the chapel wall, and disappeared. Following close behind, I found myself in a small open space of trampled ground, wholly concealed by the surrounding shrubbery. And, in between two bird-cherry trunks, I saw a large opening in the ground with earth steps leading down. Valek started down the steps, and beckoned to me to follow. In a few seconds, we were underground, in pitch darkness. Valek took my hand and led me down some damp, narrow passage, and then suddenly, after a sharp turn to the right, we emerged in a roomy vault.

I stopped short in the entrance, stunned by the strange sight that met my gaze. Two shafts of light poured down into the vault, slicing up the underground darkness. The light came in through two windows in the ceiling; one of these I had already seen from above, in the floor of the tomb, the other, I assumed, was of the same type.

The sunlight could not reach these windows directly, but was reflected down to them from the walls of the decayed tomb. Diffused in the damp air of the vault, it struck the stone slabs of the floor, and glancing off from them cast dull gleams into every corner. The walls, too, were stone. Massive columns, rising ponderously from the floor, dispensed stone arches to every side; and these merged overhead in a vaulted ceiling. On the floor, in the light that fell from the windows, crouched two figures. One was the old "Professor", who sat with bowed head, mumbling to himself, and poking with a needle at his old rags. He did not so much as lift his head when we came in. Were it not for the feeble movements of the hand that held the needle, his drab figure might have passed for a fantastic stone carving.

Under the other window sat Marusya, twiddling with the flowers in her lap, as was her wont. Though her fair head and her whole tiny figure were bathed in light, she did not seem to stand out at all distinctly against the grey stone, but was more like a hazy little dot that would fade and vanish any minute. When a cloud

drifted by across the sun, far above the ground, the walls of the vault were swallowed up by the darkness, as though opening up and retreating, but only to heave back, when the cloud passed, with all their cold, hard stone, and bear down in their heavy embrace upon the little girl's tiny figure. Somehow I recalled Valek's talk of the "grey stones" that sucked the joy out of Marusya, and a superstitious dread crept into my heart; I seemed to feel an invisible glare of stone, greedy and intent, as though the vault were jealously guarding its victim.

Marusya brightened at the sight of her brother, calling softly, "Valek!"

And when she saw me, too, her eyes began to sparkle.

I gave her my apples, and Valek broke his white loaf in two, giving half to Marusya, and the other half to the "Professor". The unfortunate scholar accepted this offering listlessly, but at once, without dropping his needle, started to eat. I fidgeted and shifted my weight from one foot to another, feeling constrained, as it were, beneath the oppressive glare of the grey stones.

"Come away. Come away from here," I said, tugging at Valek's sleeve. "Take her away, too."

And Valek called to his sister, "Marusya! Come, we're going up!"

Together we left the vault, and emerged into the daylight above. I still felt constrained, and uncomfortable. Valek seemed more gloomy than usual, and less inclined to talk.

"Was it buying that loaf that kept you so long in town?" I asked.

"Buying it?" Valek smiled wryly. "Where would I get the money?"

"What did you do, then? Beg it?"

"Beg it? As if anyone would give it to me! No, man, I pinched it from Sura's tray, at the marketplace, without her noticing it."

He said this in the most matter-of-fact tone, lying on his back, his arms folded under his head. I raised myself on my elbow, and looked straight at him.

"You mean you stole it?"

"Yes, of course."

I dropped back into the grass. There was a moment or two of silence between us.

"It's wrong to steal," I said gloomily.

"All our people had gone off. And Marusya cried, she was so hungry."

"I was hungry," Marusya repeated with plaintive frankness.

I did not yet know what hunger was, but Marusya's last words tugged at my heart, and I looked again at these new friends of mine, as though I were seeing them for the first time. Valek still lay on the grass, pensively watching a kite soaring high overhead. He seemed less of an authority to me now, and as my gaze passed to Marusya, sitting there and clasping the bread in both her hands, my heart ached at the sight.

"But why," I asked with an effort, "why, hadn't you told me about it?"

"I was going to, but then changed my mind, because you have no money of your own."

"What of it? I'd have brought some bread from home."

"You'd have sneaked it out?"

"I—I suppose so."

"You'd be stealing then?"

"It would be from my own father."

"That's even worse!" Valek declared with great conviction. "I never steal from my father."

"Well, I might have asked for it—and I'd get it."

"You'd get it once, maybe. But nobody's got enough to feed all the beggars."

"You're not beggars, are you?" I asked in dismay.

"Yes, we are," Valek replied curtly.

I fell silent. A few minutes later, I got up to say good-bye.

"Going already?" Valek asked.

"Yes, I have to go."

I had to go because I could not play with my friends that day as light-heartedly as I did before. A shadow has been cast on my innocent childish attachment for them.... It wasn't that my affection for Valek and Marusya had diminished, but that it was now tinged with a pity so keen that it wrung my heart. I went to bed early that night, not knowing how to cope with that new feeling of pain that gnawed at my being, and cried bitterly into my pillow, until I found relief in sleep from the burden of my woes.

VII.

PAN TYBURCY APPEARS ON THE SCENE

"Hullo! And I began to think that you won't come again," Valek exclaimed, when I came up the hill next day.

I knew why Valek had had that thought.

"No, I... I won't ever stop coming," I replied resolutely to end this matter once and for all.

Valek was obviously pleased, and we both felt happier.

"What about your folk?" I asked. "Not back yet?"

"Not yet.... Devil knows what's become of them."

We now merrily got down to making an ingenious trap for sparrows, for which I had brought along some string. We gave the end of the string to Marusya. And every time an imprudent sparrow, attracted by the bait, hopped in, she pulled the string, and down went the lid—the bird was captured, only to be set free directly afterwards.

However, close to noon the sky became overcast, dark clouds gathered, and to the merry peal of thunder the rain came pouring down. I shrank at the thought of

going underground at first, but then, remembering that Valek and Marusya lived there all the time, I overcame my aversion, and went down with them. It was dark and very quiet in the vault; but we could hear the thunder rolling up above, like a huge cart rumbling over huge cobblestones. Quite soon I got used to being underground, and we cheerfully spent some time listening to the earth's reception of the teeming rain. The sound of splashing water and frequent pealing of thunder were exhilarating, infusing us with new vitality.

"Let's play blind-man's buff," I suggested.

And so I was blindfolded. Marusya toddled about the stone floor on her wobbly little legs, filling the air with the feeble tinkle of her pathetic laughter. Suddenly I bumped into somebody's wet figure, and felt myself promptly being seized by one leg, lifted from the floor by a powerful arm, and swung into the air with head down. The bandage slipped from my eyes.

It was Tyburcy, who had seized me. Drenched and cross, looking even more formidable because I saw him upside

down, he held me by the leg and rolled his eyes wildly.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded sternly, his eye on Valek. "I see you're having a good time. And pleasant company, too."

"Let me go!" I pleaded, surprised that I could speak at all in the strange position in which I was held. But *Pan* Tyburcy only tightened his grip on my leg.

"Responde! Answer!" he demanded even more truculently of Valek, who found nothing better to do in his predicament than thrust two fingers in his mouth, as though in proof that there was nothing he could say in reply.

I could see, however, the friendly sympathy with which he watched me as I swung wretchedly in space like a human pendulum.

Pan Tyburcy lifted me high, so that he could look into my face.

"Ha! His Honour, the Judge, if my eyes don't deceive me. And to what may we owe the honour of this visit?"

"Let me go!" I repeated stubbornly. "Let me go this minute!" And involuntarily, as I said it, I tried to stamp my foot which only

made me swing all the more violently in mid-air.

Tyburcy laughed. "Aha! His Honour is pleased to be cross.... But you don't know me yet. Ego—Tyburcy sum. For two pins I'll hang you over the fire, and roast you like a little pig!"

I began to think that I might indeed suffer just such a fate, all the more so that Valek's own look of despair seemed to confirm it. At this point, however, Marusya came to the rescue.

"Don't you be scared, Vasya," she said reassuringly, and walked right up to Tyburcy. "He never roasts little boys over the fire. It's not true!"

And now with a quick movement Tyburcy turned me over in the air, and stood me up on my feet. I was so dizzy that I pretty nearly fell, but he steadied me, and then, sitting down on a block of wood, set me between his knees.

"How did you get in here?" he proceeded to question me. "How long has this been going on?" Getting no answer from me, he turned to Valek: "You tell me, then."

"Pretty long," Valek replied.

"How long?"

"Six days."

Pan Tyburcy seemed rather pleased by this answer.

"Six whole days!" he exclaimed, turning me around so that he could look into my face. "Six days is quite a long time. And in all that time you haven't told anybody where you go visiting?"

"No, I haven't."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly," I repeated.

"Good for you. We can hope then that you won't talk in future either? As a matter of fact, I've always thought you a good sort, seeing you about town. A real 'street urchin', judge or no judge. And will you be judging us some day, eh?"

His tone was good-natured enough, but by now I felt so deeply nettled that I replied rather peevishly:

"I'm no judge, I'm just Vasya."

"No matter, your being Vasya is not going to stop you from being a judge—and if you're not one now, you may be one later. That's the way it has been and will be! Look at us: I'm Tyburcy, and there's my boy Valek. I'm a beggar, and so is he. I steal, to be truly frank with you, and so

will he. Your father is judge to me, and some day you'll be judge to him."

"That's not true," I objected sullenly. "I won't ever be his judge!"

"He won't!" Marusya put in, sweeping aside with firm conviction the horrid suspicion against me.

She nestled trustfully against the monster's knee, and his gnarled hand gently stroked her fair hair.

"Don't be too sure," said this strange man slowly to me in the tone he would use with a grown-up person. "Don't be too sure, *amice!* It is something that goes back to long ago: to each his own—*suum cuique!* Each goes his own road. And yet—who knows?—it may be a good thing that your road has crossed ours. In any event, it's good for you, *amice,* because it's better to have a morsel of human heart in your breast than a cold stone, do you see what I mean?"

I did not see at all. But I peered at the face of this queer man. And *Pan* Tyburcy met my eyes with a fixed stare of his own that seemed to search my soul.

"You don't understand, of course. You're only a youngster. I'll try to put it briefly to you—and some day you might recall the

words of Tyburcy, the philosopher. See, if a time ever comes when Valek here stands before you to be judged, remember that, when the two of you were young fools and played together, that even then you started out on your way with proper clothing to wear and plenty of food to eat, and Valek went his way in rags and with an empty belly. Well, and for the present," his tone grew harsh, "remember this: if you let out a word of what you've seen here to that judge of yours, or to as much as a bird, I won't be Tyburcy Drub if I don't hang you by your feet in this fireplace here and make a smoked ham of you. You've understood that, I hope."

"I won't tell a soul. I....May I go on coming here?"

"I don't mind if you come ... *sub conditionem*—I better drop the Latin which you're too ignorant to understand— on the one condition that you remember about the smoked ham."

He now let me go, and stretched out, with a tired look, on a long bench that stood at the wall.

"Bring that in," he said to Valek, pointing to a large basket that he set down

in the doorway as he came in. "And start a fire. We cook dinner today."

This was no longer the man who rolled his eyes so fearfully at me only a short while ago. Nor was it the jester who harangued before the public to cadge a few coppers. He had the air of a master of the house, the head of a family, back from his job, running his household.

He seemed extremely fatigued. His clothes were wet with the rain, his face, too, the damp hair sticky on the forehead; and his whole figure spoke of exhaustion. I caught an expression I had never before seen on the face of that merry-andrew of the streets and public houses. It was like a glimpse caught behind the scenes of a spent actor, resting after the strenuous part he had played on the stage of life, and it sent a shudder through me. It was another one of these insights which the old chapel gave me so unstintingly.

Now Valek and I got briskly down to work. Valek lit a strip of kindling, and by its light we went into the dark passage, where in a corner there was a heap of rotting wood, mostly old boards and broken crosses. We brought in a few pieces, poked them into the fireplace and

set the fire going. When it came to the cooking, I had to leave it to Valek, which he managed skilfully. In half an hour, he had a stew simmering in a pot over the fire, and while we waited for it, Valek set down on a loosely knocked together three-legged table a sizzling panful of fried meat. Tyburcy got up.

"Ready?" he asked. "Very good! Come and join us, boy. You've earned your meal.... Doming *preceptor!"* he called to the "Professor". "Drop your needle and come to dinner."

"Right away," the "Professor" said quietly, his lucid answer quite a surprise to me.

However, the spark of lucidity kindled by Tyburcy's voice, did not come alight again. The old "Professor" stuck his needle into his rags, and sat down listlessly, with lack-lustre eyes, on one of the blocks of wood that served as chairs.

Marusya sat in Tyburcy's lap. She and Valek ate with a greed that clearly showed how rare a luxury meat was to them. Marusya even licked the dripping off her fingers. Tyburcy ate unhurriedly. Having apparently an irresistible urge to talk, he addressed himself from time to time to the

"Professor". The luckless scholar showed remarkable attention. Tilting his head to one side, he listened with the air of one who understood every word. Now and again he nodded or made some mumbling sound, indicating agreement.

"There, *domine,* how little we require to satisfy our needs," mused Tyburcy. "It's so, isn't it? Now that our bellies are full we need but thank the Lord—and the Kiev an priest."

"Umh'm, umh'm," the "Professor" agreed.

"There you *go, domine,* umh'ming, when you have no idea what the Klevan priest has got to do with it all—don't I know you? And yet if it weren't for the Klevan priest, we'd have no fried meat or anything else...."

"Did the Klevan priest give you all this?" I asked, recalling the round, good-natured face of the priest who at times visited my father.

"That young chap has got an inquisitive mind, *domine,"* Tyburcy said, still addressing the "Professor". "His Reverence had indeed given us all this, though never did we ask for it, and though it may well be not only that his left hand

knew not what the right was doing, but that neither hand knew anything at all....Go on eating, *domine!*"

From that strange and rather involved utterance I gathered only that the food had not been acquired in exactly the ordinary way. And I could not refrain from putting one more question:

"Did you then take it ... yourself?"

"See, the young chap's not lacking in intelligence," Tyburcy continued in the same vein. "A pity he hasn't seen the priest. That one's got a belly like a barrel, so that anyone can see overeating is bad for him. We, on the other hand, are badly underfed, so who can grudge us a little extra food, which is not extra at all?... Am I right, *domine*?"'

"Umh'm, umh'm," the "Professor" mumbled again, quite absently.

"There! You've made your point very nicely this time—and just as I was beginning to think that this young man might have sharper wit than certain scholars I know.... But to go back to the priest. He's learned a lesson, I believe. And for a lesson one pays; so we might say we bought the meat from him. And if he keeps his doors padlocked faster, that'll make us

quits. However," he turned abruptly to me, "you're still a silly boy, and there are many things you don't understand. Though this child does. Tell me, Marusya, did I do well to bring you the meat?"

"Very well," replied the little girl, with a sparkle of her turquoise eyes. "Marusya was hungry!"

Evening was drawing on when I made my way home that day, quite confounded, and deep in thought. Tyburcy's odd talk had not for a moment shaken my conviction that it was wrong to steal. If anything, the repugnance I had felt before had grown. Beggars and thieves! They were outcasts, held in general contempt. I knew that. And I, too, felt contempt welling up from somewhere deep down in my being. But instinctively I fought it down to protect my new affection from this bitter infusion. The outcome of these struggles in me was that my pity for Valek and Marusya increased and deepened; nor did my affection for them waver. I went on believing that it was wrong to steal, but when there flashed back into my mind the picture of Marusya's beaming face as she licked clean her greasy fingers, I could not but share in her and Valek's joy.

Coming down a dark path in our orchard, I bumped into my father. He was pacing gloomily up and down, as was his wont, with the usual dazed look in his eyes. When he saw me, he laid a hand on my shoulder.

"Where have you been?"

"Just ... walking."

He gave me a searching glance, and was about to say something, when the dazed look returned to his eyes and, with a shrug, he strode on down the path. What that shrug conveyed I had guessed quite well:

"What does it matter? *She* is no more!..."

I had lied to him, perhaps, for the first time in my life.

I had always been afraid of my father. And now I feared him all the more, being as I was in the grip of a whole world of troublesome questions and emotions. Could he possibly understand me? Could I confess anything to him, without betraying my friends? I trembled at the thought that he might one day get wind of the "bad company" I had picked up, but it was not in my power to turn away from that company, to betray Valek and Marusya. Besides, it had now become with me a

matter of principle, for had I betrayed my friends by breaking my word to them, I could never have looked them in the eyes again for shame.

VIII.

AUTUMN

Autumn was approaching. It was harvest time in the fields, and the leaves on the trees began to get yellow. And our Marusya started ailing.

She did not complain of anything, but kept getting thinner, her cheeks paler; her eyes darkened so that they seemed bigger than ever, and only by an effort could she raise her heavy lids.

I could visit the hill now at any time, the presence of other members of the "bad company" no longer a hindrance. I had come to know them and felt quite at home in their midst.

"You're a fine chap, sure to be a general one day, too," Turkevich assured me.

The younger of the shady characters made bows and arrows for me of elm shoots and a tall artillery officer with a big red nose tossed me up into the air, teaching me gymnastics. Only the "Professor" remained absorbed, as always, in some deep thoughts of his own, while Lavrovsky, who shunned company when he was sober, huddled in corners.

All these people had their quarters separately from Tyburcy, who with his children occupied the vault I described. The rest of the "bad company" lived in the same type of underground chamber, only bigger, which was connected with the first by two narrow corridors. There was less light in these quarters, and it was damper and gloomier. Along the walls stood benches and stumps which served for chairs. Rags of every description were heaped on the benches in place of bedding. In the middle of the chamber, where the light fell, stood a bench at which now *Pan* Tyburcy, now some of the other shady characters, did a bit of carpenting. The "bad company" included a cobbler and a basket-maker. But, apart from Tyburcy, the rest were either amateurs at their trades or weaklings, and there were those,

I noticed, whose hands were too shaky for them to cope with any decent job. The floor of this vault was strewn with shavings and bits of cut wood; dirt and disorder stared out from everywhere. Now and again Tyburcy would get worked up into a fury about this, and compel one or another of the inmates to sweep and tidy up a little these gloomy quarters. I seldom dropped in there, for I could not abide the pungent musty odour. Moreover, in his sober moments, Lavrovsky would stay here. He would sit on a bench, his face buried in his hands, with his long hair tossed about him; or pace from corner to corner. He cut such a figure of eerie gloom that my nerves gave way at the sight of him. But the other inmates seemed to be quite accustomed to his strange ways. "General" Turkevich now and then made him copy the petitions and pleas he concocted in behalf of the townspeople or the fun-poking squibs he tacked on to lamp-posts. Resignedly Lavrovsky would sit down at a small table in Tyburcy's room and go on copying for hours in his beautiful clear hand. Once or twice I saw him being dragged down into the vault when he was dead drunk, his head hanging down and swaying, his feet

dragging along the stone steps, while tears streamed down his suffering face. Marusya and I, clinging to one another, looked on from a far corner where we crouched. But Valek darted nimbly in and out between the bearers, making himself useful by supporting either the head, or an arm or a foot of the unfortunate man.

Whatever had amused or interested me about these people as I watched their clowning in the town streets, appeared to me here, "behind the scenes", in a harsh nakedness that weighed heavily upon my childish heart.

Tyburcy enjoyed indisputable authority among these people. It was he who had discovered the vaults. He was in command, and all his orders were carried out. Most likely this accounts for there not having been a single instance, as far as I can remember, of any of these wretched persons daring to propose to me a bad or doubtful action. Looking back now with the wisdom of years, I know that sin, depravity and petty vice were not absent from their midst. Yet today, when from the veiled and misty past, memories are brought back to me of these people and scenes, I can see in

them only features of deep tragedy, appalling need and grief.

Our childhood and youth! They are the greatest sources of idealism!

Autumn was fast coming into its own. Skies grew cloudier, the country around sank into foggy gloom, and the rain came pouring down in noisy torrents, echoing drearily and sadly through the vaults.

It was pretty hard for me to get away from home in such weather. The best I could do was slip out unnoticed. But when I got home soaking wet, I would hang up my things before the fire and climb meekly into bed, maintaining a philosophic silence in the face of the reproaches heaped upon me by nurse and housemaids.

With every visit I paid my friends, I found Marusya getting worse. She no longer went outdoors; and the grey stone—the dark, silent monster—pursued its fearful work uninterrupted, sucking the life from her puny frame. Most of the time she lay in bed; and Valek and I exerted all our efforts to divert and amuse her in the hope of hearing the silvery tinkle of her faint laughter.

Now that I was at home in the "bad company", Marusya's wistful smile had

become as dear to me as my own sister's gay one; moreover there was nobody here to upbraid me for my wickedness, no perpetually fault-finding nurse. Here I was *needed*—my arrival brought a flush of animation to Marusya's cheeks, Valek hugged me like a brother, and Tyburcy at times watched us with a strange look in his eyes, and a gleam that might have been of tears.

For a while the sky cleared. The last of the rain clouds vanished, and upon the drying earth beamed sunny days again, defying the approach of winter. We carried Marusya out into the sunlight every day, and each time she seemed to revive. Her eyes would open wide as she looked around her, and her cheeks would glow with colour. The breeze with its freshness seemed to infuse the life robbed from her by the grey stones of the vault. But that did not last long.

In the meantime clouds were beginning to gather over my head at home.

Making my way out down our orchard paths, as usual, one morning, I caught sight of my father in the company of Janusz from the castle. The old man was bowing obsequiously and telling something to my

father, who stood there glumly, a furrow of impatience and anger cutting deep across his forehead. Presently he flung out his arm, as though to brush Janusz from his way, and said:

"Go! You're nothing but a disgusting gossip-monger!"

But the old man, blinking, his cap in his hand, only scurried up the path, again blocking the way. My father's eyes flashed with anger. Janusz spoke so quietly that I could not make out a word; but my father's curt replies reached me sharp and clear like the lash of a whip.

"I don't believe a word of it.... What have you got against these people? Where are your proofs?... I take no verbal reports, and if you make a written report, you're obliged to bring proof.... Keep your tongue! That's my affair....! won't hear another word."

Finally, my father brushed Janusz aside so brusquely that he dared not annoy him further. Then my father turned down one of the side paths, and I dashed on to the gate.

I had a great dislike for the old owl from the castle, and now after what I witnessed my heart was heavy with foreboding. The

conversation I had overheard, I knew, concerned my friends, and perhaps myself as well.

When I told him about it, Tyburcy made a terrible face.

"Eh, youngster, that's unpleasant news. A curse on that old hyena!"

"My father sent him away," I said comfortingly.

"Your father, sonny, is the flower of judges, beginning from Solomon down. Do you know what a *curriculum vitae* means? No! You do not, of course. Look here, the *curriculum vitae* is the life-history of one who has never had anything to do with a court of justice; and if the snoopy old owl has raked up a thing or two from the past, and goes and tells your father my history—I swear by the Holy Virgin, • sonny—I should not like to fall into the judge's hands."

"But surely he is not a hard man?" I asked remembering what Valek had said.

"Oh, no, no, sonny, God forbid that you should think ill of your father. Your father has a heart. And he knows many things.... I wouldn't be surprised if he already knew all Janusz can tell him, but he does nothing because he sees no need in baiting an old

toothless beast in his last lair.... Only how can I put it to you, sonny, so you'll understand? See, your father serves a master whose name is Law. He has eyes, he has a heart, only as long as the Law lies asleep on its shelves. But when that master comes down from the shelves and says to your father— 'Well, Judge, isn't it time we went after Tyburcy Drub or whatever that man's name is?'—from that moment on, the judge must lock away his heart. And then the judge's grip is firm, so firm that the earth would sooner rotate backwards than Tyburcy wriggle out of that grip.... Do you understand me, sonny? And for this I respect your father all the more because he is a faithful servant of the Law, and such persons are rare. Were all its servants like your father, the Law could sleep peacefully on its shelves and never be disturbed at all.... My trouble is that some time in the past—quite long ago—I had something of a disagreement with the law. It was a sudden quarrel, if you get my meaning. But, sonny, it was a bad quarrel."

Having said this, Tyburcy rose, and lifting Marusya up in his arms, retired with her to a far corner, kissing her tenderly and pressing his ugly head to her tiny

bosom. I did not stir, and stood for quite a while in the same position, stunned by the strange things this strange man had said to me. For all his fanciful and obscure turns of speech, I had grasped perfectly the essence of what he had said about my father. And in my thoughts my father's figure acquired still greater stature, bathed in an aureole of austere yet appealing strength, of actual grandeur. At the same time, the old feeling of bitter resentment grew as well....

So that was what he was like, my father, I mused, only he did not love me.

IX.

THE DOLL

The sunny days came to an end, and again Marusya grew worse. She met all our efforts to amuse her with an indifferent glassy stare of her big, sombre eyes. And for many days now we had not heard her laugh. I began bringing her my toys, but

they held her attention for only the briefest time. It was then that I plucked up courage and appealed to my sister Sonya.

Sonya had a big doll with bright pink cheeks and gorgeous flaxen hair, the gift of our dead mother. I set great hopes on this doll, and, calling Sonya into one of the side paths of our orchard, asked her to give it to me for a short time. At first she only hugged it the tighter; but I begged so earnestly, described to her so vividly the poor sick child, who never had any toys of her own, that in the end she gave the doll to me, promising to play with her other toys for two or three days and say nothing about it to anyone.

The effect produced by this grand porcelain lady exceeded all my expectations. Marusya, drooping like a flower in the autumn, seemed to have suddenly come back to life. She hugged me so! And she laughed most merrily as she conversed with her new acquaintance.... The doll had practically achieved a miracle. Confined to her bed for so many days, Marusya got up again, and walked about, leading her flaxen-haired daughter by the hand. At times she even ran about

the vault, shuffling along on her weak little feet.

But for me the doll was the cause of many an anxious moment. First, when I was on my way to the hill with the doll under my jacket, I passed old Janusz in the street, who stared long after me and shook his head. Then, a day or two later, our old nurse noticed that the doll was missing, and began searching for it in every corner of the house. Sonya tried to divert her, but her innocent assurances that she did not need the doll, that it had gone out walking and would soon be back, only puzzled the servants and aroused the suspicion that the toy had not been simply mislaid. My father knew nothing of this as yet. But Janusz paid another visit, and though my father sent him away with even greater anger than before, I was stopped by him that day on my way to the gate, and ordered to stay at home. Next day, too, I was not allowed out; and it was not until four days later that I was able to get away, climbing the fence and running off before my father was awake.

On the hill the news was bad again. Marusya was in bed and worse than ever. Her face was strangely flushed, her fair

hair spread loose over her pillow; she knew no one at all. Beside her lay the doll with its rosy cheeks and silly bright eyes.

I spoke to Valek of my misgivings, and we decided it would be best to take the doll back—the more so that Marusya seemed beyond missing it. But we were mistaken. Half-conscious as she was, she opened her eyes, when I took the doll out of her arms, and stared vacantly in front of her, as though not seeing me or understanding what was going on. And then, unexpectedly, she began to cry very softly, yet so plaintively, and an expression of such poignant grief crossed her thin face through the veil of delirium that in fright I quickly replaced the doll at her side. She smiled and happily pressed the doll to her breast. It came to me then that I was on the point of robbing my little friend of the first and last joy of her brief life.

Valek cast me a timorous glance.

"What will you do?" he asked sadly.

Tyburcy, sitting crestfallen on the bench by the wall, too, turned to me questioningly.

With as good an air of nonchalance as I could muster, I replied, "Never mind! Nurse has probably forgotten about it."

But our old nurse had not forgotten. Coming home that day, I met Janusz in the gateway. I found Sonya with her eyes red from crying; our nurse threw me an angry, withering glance, and mumbled something under her breath with her sunken lips.

My father asked me where I had been. I made my usual answer. He listened gravely, but said nothing, except to order me once again not to leave the house without his permission. The order was final and firmly put; I dared not disobey it, nor did I have the courage to ask for the required permission.

Four weary days elapsed. I wandered drearily about the orchard, looking longingly in the direction of the hill, and waiting for the storm gathering over me to break. I did not know what to expect, but my heart was heavy. I had never in my life been punished; not only had my father never struck me, but I had never so much as heard a sharp word from him. But now I was assailed by dark misgivings.

At last I was summoned to my father, in his study. I entered and paused timidly at the door. Through the window the sorrowful autumn sun was peeping in. My father did not turn to look at me, but went

on sitting in his armchair before my mother's portrait. I could hear the pounding of my heart.

He finally turned. I looked up at him, and quickly dropped my eyes. I was terrified at the look in his face. Perhaps half a minute passed during which I could feel his probing and crushing stare.

"Did you take your sister's doll?"

I started at these words, they dropped upon me with such sharp impact.

"Yes," I replied almost inaudibly.

"Were you aware that it was a gift from your mother, something you ought to treasure as a sacred memory?... And you stole it?"

"No," I said, raising my head.

"No, you say?" he cried starting to his feet with a jerk of the armchair. "You stole it, and took it away somewhere!... Where did you take it? Speak up!"

He strode up to me and laid a heavy hand on my shoulder. With an effort I lifted my head and looked up at him. His face was white. The furrow of pain that had appeared in between his brows after my mother's death was as deep as ever, but his eyes now blazed with anger. I shrank

from those eyes in which I could see almost frenzy or was it hatred?

"Well then! Speak up!" He tightened the grip of his hand on my shoulder.

"I ... I will not," I answered in a low voice.

"Oh yes, you will!" he said sharply, with a threatening note in his voice.

"I won't," I answered in an even lower tone.

"You will, you will!"

He spoke in a choked, gasping voice, as though he had to force the words out with painful effort. I could feel his hand trembling and thought I heard in his chest the pounding of his rising rage. I hung my head lower and lower, tears welled in my eyes and trickled down onto the floor, but still, barely audibly, I repeated:

"I won't tell ... I'll never tell you—not for anything!"

I showed myself at that moment to be my father's son. Not by the most terrible torments could he have got any other answer out of me. His threats only brought up in me the half-dormant sense of the injury of a rejected child— and of fervid love for my friends at the old chapel who welcomed me so warmly.

My father drew a laboured breath. I shrank, bitter tears scorching my cheeks, and waited.

The feeling I had at that moment could hardly be defined. I knew my father to be hot-tempered, and could see that he was boiling over with rage—any minute now, perhaps, I would find myself helplessly struggling in his iron grip. What would he do to me in his frenzy? Toss me into a corner? Break my bones? But as I see it now, it was not that I feared.... Even in that dreadful moment, I loved my father; my instinct, however, told me that he might by some blind act of violence shatter my love for him completely, so that for ever afterwards, whether I lived under his roof or in later life, I shall nurse that same burning hatred for him as now flashed out at me from his sombre eyes.

I now ceased to be afraid. A feeling of defiance and reckless challenge welled up in my breast. I seemed to be waiting, even hoping, for the worst to happen. If it had to come to this, all the better, be as it may....

Again my father drew a laboured breath. I no longer looked at him, only heard that breath—a heavy, long gasp. I cannot tell to this day if my father had conquered his

fury or if the explosion was averted by the sudden and unexpected interruption that occurred just at that crucial moment. A gruff voice was suddenly heard at the open window.

"Ha! My poor young friend!"

"Tyburcy!" flashed through my mind. But his arrival meant nothing to me. Tensely I waited for the blow I was expecting to fall any moment. It never occurred to me, even when I felt my father's hand on my shoulder quiver at the interruption, that Tyburcy's appearance or any other extraneous circumstance might stand between my father and myself, might avert the inevitable outburst which I now awaited with a surge of reckless, answering anger.

Coming quickly into the house, Tyburcy paused in the doorway of the study. His sharp lynx eyes took in the situation at a glance. I remember the scene to this day in its every detail. A cold, exultant sneer flashed for a moment in the greenish eyes and across the wide ugly face of Tyburcy, the street orator, and just as quickly faded away. He shook his head. When he spoke it was in a sad rather than his usual ironical tone.

"Ha! I find my young friend in quite a predicament."

My father met him with a gloomy stare of surprise, but Tyburcy did not falter beneath it. He was grave now, no longer the clown, and his eyes gazed with an unwonted sadness in them.

"Your Honour!" he said quietly. "You are a just man. Let the child go. He's been in 'bad company', true, but—God is my witness—he's done nothing wrong. And if he's taken a liking to my ragamuffins, why, I swear it, you can have me hanged, before I'll let him suffer for it. Here's your doll, boy!...

He untied the bundle he was carrying, and there the doll was.

My father relaxed his grip on my shoulder. His face showed great amazement.

"What does it all mean?" he demanded. "Let the boy go," Tyburcy repeated, and he gently stroked my head with his broad hand. "You'll get nothing out of him by threats, whereas I'll gladly tell you what you want to know. Could we step into some other room, Your Honour?"

My father, still staring at Tyburcy amazedly, agreed. As both of them walked

out, I remained there, standing alone, overwhelmed by the feelings that surged in me. I was oblivious to the world. And if I do remember to this day the scene in its every particular—down to the frisking of the sparrows outside the window, and the even splash of oar strokes coming from the river—I owe it to the mechanical registering of the mind. At the moment I was aware of nothing, except the existence of a little boy whose heart was shaken and beclouded by two conflicting emotions—wrath and love—as would be a receptacle containing two different liquids. There was such a little boy, and I was that little boy, and apparently I was sorry for myself. Yes—and there were two voices, sounding through the shut door in muffled but animated conversation.

I was still standing where they had left me, when the two men returned. I felt a hand on my head and started. It was my father's hand, gently stroking my hair.

Tyburcy lifted me and sat me down on his lap in my father's presence.

"Come and see us," he said. "I dare say your father will let you come and say farewell to my little girl. She ... she's dead."

Tyburcy's voice quivered, and his eyes blinked strangely. But he got up quickly, set me down on the floor, drew himself up, and strode out of the room.

I looked up questioningly at my father. A different man stood before me, and I now sensed in him the tenderness I had so vainly sought before. He looked at me in his usual thoughtful way, only now there was a hint of amazement and something like a question in his eyes. The storm that had just passed over us had swept away, as it were, the heavy fog that sheathed my father's heart, obscuring the love and kindness underneath. And my father was at last able to discern in me the familiar traits of a son of his own.

Taking his hand trustfully, I said:

"I didn't steal it.... Sonya gave it to me herself for a few days."

"Yes," he replied pensively. "I know. I was wrong, my boy, and I hope you will try to forget it, won't you?"

I clasped his hand fervently, and kissed it. I now felt that he would never turn upon me that dreadful look of a few minutes past, and a love, long restrained, came surging into my heart.

I was not afraid of him any more.

"May I go to the hill?" I asked suddenly, remembering Tyburcy's invitation.

"Ye-yes, go, my boy, and say good-bye," he said fondly, but with still that hint of puzzlement in his voice. "Though—wait a minute, please, just a minute more, my boy."

He went out into his bedroom, and returned a minute later with some bills, which he thrust into my hand.

"Give them to ... Tyburcy.... Tell him that I kindly beg him—will you remember? —kindly beg him to take the money... as coming from you.... Do you understand? Tell him also," my father seemed to hesitate, "tell him that if he knows one here of the name of Fedorovich, he might warn this Fedorovich that it would be best for him to leave this town. And now go, my boy, go quickly."

It was on the hillside that I caught up with Tyburcy. Clumsily, all out of breath, I delivered my father's message.

"Father ... kindly begs you..." and I pressed the money into his hand.

I did not look into his face. He took the money, and gloomily received the message concerning Fedorovich.

Marusya lay on a bench in a dark corner of the vault. Dead! A child cannot grasp the full meaning of that word. And it was not until I saw her lifeless form that I chocked with heartbroken tears. My tiny friend lay grave and sad, her face pathetically drawn, her closed eyes slightly sunken, and the blue shadows under them even more pronounced than before. Her lips were parted in an expression of childish sadness—as though in answer to our tears.

The "Professor" stood behind her, shaking his head listlessly. In a corner the artillery officer was at work with his axe, knocking together, with the help of a few more of the shady characters, a coffin of old boards torn from the chapel roof. Sober and fully mindful of his task, Lavrovsky was decking Marusya in autumn flowers. In another corner Valek was asleep. He quivered in his sleep, and from time to time broke into a convulsive sobbing.

CONCLUSION

Soon after the events I have described the "bad company" dispersed. The "Professor" alone remained, loitering in the town streets to his very last days, and there was Turkevich, too, to whom my father would occasionally give some writing to do. And I shed a good deal of blood in skirmishes with the Jewish boys who tormented the "Professor" by reminding him of the sharp and cutting instruments.

The artillery officer and the rest of the shady characters went away to try their luck elsewhere, Tyburcy and Valek vanished suddenly, and nobody knew where they went to, just as nobody had known where they had come from to our town.

The old chapel fell into greater decay. First, the roof collapsed, and crushed the ceiling of the underground vaults. Then the ground around the chapel sank in, making it look grimmer still. The owls hooted ever louder in the ruins, and on dark autumn nights, there appeared over the graves startling flashes of a sinister blue light.

But one little grave was lovingly surrounded by a fence, and was bright

with fresh green turf and flowers when the spring was back.

Sonya and I used to pay frequent visits to this grave, and sometimes our father would accompany us. We liked to sit there in the shade of a gently whispering birch and look at the town beaming mistily below. Here we read and meditated, shared our first elated and sincere youthful thoughts and dreams.

And when the call came to us to leave this peaceful place, where we were born, we came up there on the last day and full of life and hope made vows over the tiny grave.

1885.

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

THE BLIND MUSICIAN

An Etude

Translated from the Russian
by Helen Altschuler

AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE SIXTH EDITION*

[In which considerable changes and additions have been made.]*

The present revision and enlargement of a story which has already appeared in several editions is rather a departure from the usual, I realise; and a brief explanation must be offered. My etude centres, as its basic psychological motif, around man's instinctive, organic craving for light. From this craving arises the spiritual crisis in the hero's development, and its eventual resolution. In criticism of the story, both printed and oral, I have repeatedly encountered an objection which at first glance may seem very well founded. The craving for light, my critics feel, cannot be predicated of the born blind; for they have never seen light, know nothing of it, and cannot, therefore, be aware the lack of it. This consideration does not seem to me convincing. None of us have ever flown like birds; yet we all know how long the sensation of flight persists in dreams—all through childhood and youth. Still, I must admit that my adoption of this motif was

purely a priori, based on imagination rather than on concrete knowledge. It was not until several years after the first editions of the story had come out that I chanced, in the course of one of my excursions, upon an opportunity for direct observation. The two bell-ringers (one born blind, the other blind from childhood) whom the reader will find in Chapter VI; the contrast in their moods; their attitude towards the children; Yegor's talk of dreams—all this was noted in my memorandum book as I actually observed it in the belfry of the Sarova Monastery, Tambov Eparchy, where, perhaps, the two blind bellmen are showing visitors up the winding stairs to this very day. From the hour when I observed it, that scene in the belfry—conclusive, to my mind, in the question under debate—lay more heavily on my conscience with each new edition of the story; and it was only the difficulty of return to a once finished work that prevented me from introducing it. Of the changes finally made in the present edition, the most important is the addition of this scene. As to the rest—once I had made the return, and my mind had fallen again into its former train of thought,

there could be no question, of course, of a mere mechanical insertion of the one new bit. Other changes, throughout the story, were inevitable.

February 25, 1898

Chapter One

I

A child was born, in the dead of night, to a wealthy family in the South-West Territory. The young mother lay sunk in heavy languor; but when the infant's first cry sounded, low and plaintive, she began to toss feverishly on her bed. Her eyes were shut, but her lips moved, whispering, and her pale face, still soft of outline almost as a child's, twisted as though in suffering and impatient protest—the expression a much-petted child might wear on its first contact with sorrow.

The midwife bent close over the whispering lips.

"Why? Why does he..." the mother asked, almost inaudibly.

The midwife did not understand. Again the child's cry sounded. An expression of bitter suffering passed over the mother's face, and a heavy tear welled from her eyes.

"Why? Why?" she whispered, faintly as before.

This time the midwife understood her question, and answered tranquilly:

"Why the child cries? It's always so. Don't you worry yourself about it."

But the mother was not to be soothed. She started at each new cry, demanding over and over again, with wrathful impatience:

"Why so ... so dreadful?"

The midwife heard nothing out of the ordinary in the child's cries; and the mother, she could see, was hardly conscious—did not, perhaps, even know what she was saying. Turning away from the bed, she busied herself with the infant.

The mother fell silent. Only, now and again, some grievous suffering, finding no outlet in words or movement, pressed great tears from her shut eyes. Through the heavy lashes they seeped, and rolled softly down the marble pallor of her cheeks.

Can the mother's heart have sensed the grim, the unalleviable tragedy that had come into the world with the new-born life —that hung over the infant's cradle, to follow him through all his life, to the very grave?

Or was it, perhaps, no more than delirium? Be that as it may, the child was born blind.

II

No one noticed it, at first. The baby boy turned on the world the same dull, vague look as, to a certain age, all new-born infants do. Day passed after day, until the new life began to be reckoned in weeks. The child's eyes cleared. The dullness lifted, and the pupils seemed to focus. But he did not turn his head to follow the bright beam of light that came into the room in company with the cheery twitter of the birds in the luxuriant country garden, with the murmur of the green beeches swaying close by the open windows. The mother, now herself again, was the first to look, in new alarm, into the baby's face—the first to notice its strange expression, its unchildlike gravity, immobility.

"Why does he stare like that? Tell me—oh, tell me why," she kept asking—seeking

comfort, like a frightened dove, in the faces around her.

"What do you mean?" people would answer, unresponsive to her anxiety. "The child is like any child of the same age."

"But see how strangely his hands seem to grope."

"The child is too young to co-ordinate movements with visual impressions," the doctor explained.

"But why do his eyes look always straight ahead? Why does he never turn them? Is he—is he blind?"

And, once the fearful guess had burst from the mother's lips, no words could be found to console her.

The doctor lifted the child, turned it quickly to the light, and looked into its eyes. He seemed a little disturbed, and hurried away with no more than a few non-committal words and the promise to look in again in a day or two.

The mother trembled like a wounded bird. Sobbing, she pressed the child to her breast. But the child's eyes looked out as before, grave and unmoving.

In a day or two, as he had promised, the doctor came again—provided, this time, with an ophthalmoscope. He lit a candle

and brought it up to the child's eyes; moved it away, and brought it close again. Many times over, he repeated his tests, his eyes fixed steadily on the child's pupils. And finally, deeply disturbed, he said:

"You were not mistaken, madam, to my great regret. The boy is blind. And beyond all hope of cure."

The mother received his verdict with quiet melancholy.

"I have known it a long time," she answered softly.

III

The family to which the blind child had been born was not a large one. There were the mother and father; and there was "Uncle Maxim", as he was called by everyone in the house and many outside it. The father was a country landowner, very much like a thousand other country landowners in the South-West Territory. He was good-natured—one might call him even kind; treated his labourers well; and was tremendously fond of mills, one or

another of which he was perpetually constructing or reconstructing. This occupation took up so much of his time that his voice was seldom heard in the house except at those hours of the day that were set aside for breakfast, dinner, and the like domestic occasions. Coming in, he would invariably ask, "And how are you today, my love?"—after which he would sit down to his meal and hardly speak till it was over, except, perhaps, now and again, for some announcement concerning the virtues of oak shafts and cog-wheels. A simple, peaceful existence, and not one, of course, to influence to any great degree the formation of his son's character and mentality. But Uncle Maxim—that was a different matter. Ten years or so before the events just described, Uncle Maxim had been known as the most dangerous wrangler not only in the vicinity of his own estate, but even at the Kiev "Contracts". ["Contracts"—the local term for the once wide-famed Kiev Fair.]

It had puzzled everyone to understand how Pani Popelskaya, nee Yatsenko—such a respectable family, in every way—could have come by so dreadful a brother. One had never known what tone to take with

him, or how to please him. To the gentry's civilities, he had returned disdainful insolence; yet from peasants he had endured rudeness and liberties that would have provoked the mildest of the gentry to use his fists. Finally, however, to the infinite relief of all sober-minded folk, he had got terribly angry with the Austrians over something or other, and left for Italy; and there he had joined up with just such another brawler and heretic as himself—one Garibaldi, who, as the gentry whispered in pious horror, had sworn brotherhood with the devil, and cared not a snap for the very Pope. Of course, Maxim had doomed that wayward, schismatic soul of his for all eternity—but, on the other hand, the "Contracts" had become appreciably more peaceful, and many ladies round about had been relieved, at last, of the constant fear for their sons' safety.

The Austrians, evidently, had got angry with Uncle Maxim, too. The battle accounts in the Courier, traditional newspaper of the Polish landowners in these parts, had mentioned him now and again as one of the most reckless of Garibaldi's followers; and one day this

same Courier had informed its readers that Maxim had gone down, with his horse, in the field of battle—whereupon the infuriated Austrians, long eager for a chance at this pestiferous Volhynian (in his fellow-Volhynians' imaginations, more or less the only prop that kept Garibaldi from collapse), had slashed him into mincemeat.

"A bad end, Maxim's," the gentlefolk had thought to themselves, ascribing his fall to St. Peter's special intercession in behalf of his successor—Christ's vicar on earth. Maxim had been considered dead.

As it turned out, however, the Austrian sabres had failed to drive Maxim's indomitable soul from his body, badly though they had marred his limbs. Garibaldi's fire-eaters had borne their worthy comrade out of the fray and put him into hospital; and, some years later, he had suddenly arrived at his sister's home and there settled down for good.

Duels, now, were not for him. His right leg was gone, so that he could not walk without a crutch; and his left arm was too maimed to do anything more than manage a stick. He was graver, too, and quieter—only, at times, his sharp tongue would lash out, unerring as once his sword had been.

He no longer visited the "Contracts", and rarely appeared in society. The greater part of his time was spent in his library, in the reading of books that no one had ever heard of or knew anything about, except for a general suspicion that they must be altogether godless. He did some writing, too; but as nothing from his pen ever appeared in the Courier, people attributed no great importance to his literary activities.

At the time when the new young life came into being in the little country home, the silver was beginning to show on Uncle Maxim's close-cropped hair and his shoulders had hunched up with the constant pressure of the crutches until his body seemed almost square. People who did not know him well were often afraid of him—awed by his queer figure and gloomy frown, by the loud tapping of his crutches, and the dense clouds of tobacco-smoke that issued from the pipe he never tired of smoking. And only his closest friends knew the kindly warmth of the heart that beat in the invalid's mutilated body; only they guessed at the tireless mental labour that went on in the big, square-hewn head,

under the thick bristle of close-cropped hair.

But not even his closest friends could know what problem it was that occupied his mind at this period in his life. They knew only that Uncle Maxim would often sit for hours on end, enveloped in a blue haze of smoke, his eyes clouded and his shaggy eyebrows glumly drawn. What the crippled fighter was thinking was that life is struggle, with no room for invalids. He was out of the ranks for good—a burden for the baggage train, and nothing more. He was a knight whom life had struck from the saddle and thrown to earth. Was it not a cowardly thing to lie there, grovelling in the dust, like a trampled worm? Was it not cowardly to clutch at the victor's stirrup, begging to be left the miserable scraps of existence still remaining?

But while Uncle Maxim considered this searing thought, weighing and balancing the arguments for and against with cold, steady courage, a new being appeared in the household— an invalid from its very coming into the world. At first he hardly noticed the blind child. But it was not long before he began to ponder, with philosophic interest, over the strange

resemblance between the child's fate and his own.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, one day, with a sidewise glance at the infant, "there's another invalid—this youngster. If you could put the two of us together, you'd get one proper man out of us, maybe."

And from that time on his eyes turned to the child more and more often.

IV

The boy had been born blind. Who was to blame for his misfortune? No one. Not only had there been no shade of "evil intent" on anybody's part, but the very cause of the misfortune lay concealed somewhere deep down in life's mysterious intricacies. Yet, with her every glance at the blind boy, the mother's heart contracted with bitter pain. She suffered as any mother would, of course, because of her son's deficiency, in heavy foreboding of the griefs that life would hold for him; but, aside from this, in the depths of her heart she carried the aching realisation that the cause of his misfortune lay in some evil potentiality in those who had given him life. And that was sufficient to make this tiny being, with the beautiful, but unseeing eyes, an unconscious despot to whose slightest whim the entire household was obedient.

It is hard to say what might have come of the boy in time, predisposed as he was by his misfortune to an undirected bitterness of spirit, and encouraged by his

entire environment to the development of egoism—had it not been for the strange fate, and the Austrian sabres, that had compelled Uncle Maxim to settle down with his sister in the country.

Gradually, almost insensibly, the presence of the blind child in the house turned the crippled soldier's restless thoughts in a new direction. He would still sit puffing at his pipe for hours on end; but the dull, bottomless pain in his eyes had given place to a look of thoughtful, interested observation. And the more Uncle Maxim observed, the harder he puffed at that pipe of his, and the more often his bushy brows frowned in displeasure. At length, one day, he made up his mind to interfere.

"This youngster," he began, issuing ring upon ring of smoke, "he'll be unhappier than me, by far. He'd have been luckier never to be born."

The young mother bowed her head, and a tear dropped on to her sewing.

"It's cruel of you to remind me of it, Max," she answered faintly. "So cruel, when you know there's nothing we can do,"

"It's only the truth I'm saying," Maxim returned. "I lack a leg and an arm, but I've got my sight. The youngster lacks sight, and in time he'll lack legs and arms as well, and all power of will besides."

"What makes you say that?"

"Do try to understand this, Anna," he said, more gently. "I wouldn't speak so harshly without reason. The boy is clearly very responsive. He has every chance, as yet, of developing his other capacities to a degree where they may compensate his blindness, at least in part. But development requires practice, exercise. And exercise results from necessity. Only from necessity. Whereas this foolish solicitude, that guards him against all necessity of effort, kills his every chance of fuller development."

The mother was not stupid. She found the strength to overcome the spontaneous impulse that had sent her flying headlong to the rescue at the child's slightest cry. In the months that followed this conversation, the boy learned to crawl freely and rapidly about the house; to give his attention to every sound around him; to finger every object that came into his grasp, with an

eager interest seldom to be observed in other children.

V

He quickly learned to recognise his mother—by her gait, by the rustle of her dress, by a multitude of other signs that none but he could distinguish. No matter how many people there might be in the room, or how they might move about, he would go unerringly through the room to her. When she took him up, however unexpectedly, he always knew that it was she. When others lifted him, he would pass his fingers lightly over their faces, and would quickly recognise the members of the household—his nurse, and Uncle Maxim, and his father. But if the person who had taken him up was a stranger, the movements of the tiny fingers would grow slower. Gently, but very minutely, he would trace the outlines of the unfamiliar face, his own face set in a look of strained attention—as though his fingertips were "seeing" for him.

By nature he was a very lively, active child. But as the months passed by his temperament showed more and more the imprint of his blindness. His movements became gradually less impulsive. He developed a habit of hiding away in quiet corners, where he would sit for hours, hardly moving, his face set and strained as though he were listening for something. When the room was quiet, and his attention was not held by the changing sounds of talk and movement, he would seem to fall into thought, and an expression of bewilderment and wonder would cloud his handsome face, so unchildishly grave.

Uncle Maxim had been right. The boy's nature, responsive and richly endowed, came to his aid. By delicate receptive-ness of touch and hearing it strove, as it were, to restore whatever might be restored of fullness of perception. His sense of touch was amazing. There were times when it seemed, even, that he had some understanding of colour; for his seeking fingers would linger on brightly coloured objects, and a look of extraordinary concentration would come into his face when he handled them. The most intensive

development, however, as time made increasingly clear, was that of his sense of hearing.

He soon knew every room in the house by the sounds peculiar to it; knew the gait of every member of the household; knew the creak of his invalid uncle's chair, the dry, even sound of the thread when his mother was sewing, the monotonous ticking of the clock. Sometimes, crawling about the floor, he would pause to listen to some sound that no one else could hear, and stretch out his hand after a fly that was creeping up the wall paper. When the fly took wing, his expression, at first, would change to one of painful perplexity, because he could not understand where it had gone. As he grew older, however, such disappearances no longer caused him any perplexity. He would simply turn his head in the direction the fly had taken; for his hearing had grown so keen that he could distinguish the flutter of its wings.

The world around him—alive with movement, with sound and colour—reached the blind boy chiefly in the form of sound; and his conceptions of his surroundings were chiefly sound-conceptions. His face often wore a

peculiar, listening expression, his chin the least bit forward and his slender-neck outstretched. His eyebrows became strikingly mobile. But his beautiful eyes remained unmoving. And this gave his face a look at once of childish sternness and of pathos.

VI

The boy's third winter was drawing to its close. The snow was melting out of doors, and spring streams had sprung to noisy life. The boy had been sickly all through the winter, and confined to the house, without a breath of outdoor air; but now his health began to improve.

The storm-windows were removed, and the joy of spring burst into the house with redoubled vigour. The merry sun flooded the rooms with light. The beeches, still bare, swayed as always just outside the windows. And in the distance lay the black, bare fields, dotted here and there with white heaps of melting snow. In many spots the grass already showed, a pale,

tender green. The very air was softer, easier to breathe. And the whole household felt a sense of renewal, a springtime surging of cheerful, vital energy.

To the blind boy, spring came only as hurried sounds, filling the rooms. He heard the rush of the spring waters, stream racing after stream, leaping among the stones, cutting their way through the soft, wet earth. He heard the beeches whispering by the windows. Their branches kept brushing together, and sometimes a twig would strike a window-pane and set it tinkling. He heard the hurried, insistent patter of a myriad falling drops, where the icicles that hung from the roof, caught by the frost at dawn, were now melting in the sun. Sharp and clear, these sounds came into the house—like round, swift pebbles, striking upon his hearing. Sometimes, too, through these nearer sounds, came the call of the cranes, floating down to earth from distant heights and fading gradually into silence, as though melting away in the clear air.

These days of Nature's springtime animation brought to the child's face a look of bewilderment and distress. He

would stretch out his neck and draw his brows, listening painfully—then, as though frightened by this confusion of sounds, suddenly stretch out his arms to his mother, and press close against her breast.

"What ails the child?" the mother wondered, and asked of everyone around her.

Uncle Maxim looked long and earnestly into the boy's face, seeking some explanation of his strange alarm. But he found nothing.

"He ... he can't understand," the mother said hesitantly, watching the child's expression of tortured question and bewilderment.

Truly, he was frightened and uneasy—now puzzling over the new sounds, now wondering that the old ones, to which he had grown used, had suddenly fallen still, disappeared, he could not guess where to.

VII

The chaos of early spring was stilled. As the days went by, the hot sun, beaming down, brought Nature's labours more and more into their normal rhythm. Life tensed, as it were. Its advance grew swifter, gathering speed like an engine when the throttle is thrown open. The meadows turned green, and the scent of birch buds filled the air.

It was decided to take the boy out through the fields, to the bank of the near-by river.

The mother took him by the hand. Uncle Maxim, on his crutches, walked beside them. They went through the fields together towards a grass-grown hillock by the riverside, where the ground had been thoroughly dried by wind and sun. From the top of the hillock, a broad view opened out over the surrounding country.

To the mother and Uncle Maxim the day was so bright, as they set out, that they had to screw up their eyes against the glare. The sunbeams warmed their faces, but the spring wind, fluttering unseen, fanned away this warmth and replaced it with a refreshing coolness. There was something intoxicating in the air,

something inducive of a sweet, sleepy languor.

The mother felt a sudden clinging pressure of the little hand she held. But the heady breath of spring had made her less sensitive than always to this signal of the child's uneasiness. She walked on, her face uplifted, drawing deep, eager breaths of the spring air. Had she looked down, even for an instant, she must have noticed the child's strange expression. His open eyes were turned straight to the sun, and his lips were parted, in a look of dumb amazement. He breathed in short, quick gasps, like a fish that has been jerked out of the water. At moments, a look of almost tortured rapture would break through his helpless bewilderment, passing over the little face in a sort of nervous spasm and lighting it up for an instant, only to be replaced again by that look of dumb amazement, of frightened, perplexed inquiry. Only his eyes remained unmoved, unseeing, inexpressive.

They climbed the hillock, and sat down on its grassy top. The mother lifted the child to settle him more comfortably—and again he clutched at her hand, as though he were afraid that he would fall, as

though he lacked the feeling of the firm earth under him. But again, absorbed by the spring beauty all about her, the mother did not notice his uneasiness.

It was midday, and the sun hung almost motionless in the blue heights. The river lay below, broad and deep, in the fullness of its spring waters. It had broken through its winter coat and carried it off, all but a few last floes of melting ice that still drifted here and there—white spots on the bright surface. The flooded water-meadows were like broad lakes; and white cloudlets—reflected, with the inverted blue arch of the sky, in their quiet depths—drifted about them and disappeared, like the melting ice-floes on the river. Now and again the breeze would set the water rippling, sparkling in the sunlight. Beyond the river, the fields lay black and wet and steaming, and through the quivering haze one glimpsed thatched hovels in the distance, and, farther still, the dim blue outline of the forest edge. The earth seemed to breathe, in long, sighing breaths, sending up fragrant incense in worship to the skies.

All Nature was one great temple, arrayed in readiness for holiday. But to the

blind boy there was only darkness, vast, unbounded; a darkness that had come into unwonted agitation all around him, that moved, and rang, and rumbled, that reached out to him, urged upon him from every side new, never before experienced impressions, in such multitude as made his little heart beat fast and painfully.

With his first steps out of doors, when the hot day struck him full in the face, warming his delicate skin, he had turned his unseeing eyes instinctively towards the sun, as though in understanding that here was the centre, the focus to which all the world around him gravitated. The clear distances on every side, the blue vault above, the far circle of the horizon—of these he knew nothing. He knew only that something material, something gentle, caressing, touched his face and warmed it. And then something cool and light, but less light than the sunny warmth, took the soft warmth away and swept his face with a refreshing coolness. Indoors, the boy had learned to move freely about the rooms. Space, there, was empty. But here—here he was seized by something that came over him in sweeping waves, in inexplicable alternation: now gently

caressing, now rousing, intoxicating. The sun's warm touch would be swiftly blown away, and the wind would seize his cheeks, his temples—would circle his head, from chin to nape, until his ears began to ring—would pull at his whole body, as though trying to lift him up and carry him off into that space his blind eyes could not see. It tugged at his consciousness, inducing forgetfulness, lassitude. And the child's hand clung hard to the mother's; his heart trembled, and almost stopped.

When they sat him down in the grass he felt a little easier, at first. The feeling of strangeness was still there, filling his whole being; but through it, now, he began to distinguish one and another of the sounds around him. The dark, caressing waves came over him as before. They seemed even to penetrate into his body; for his blood pulsed in his veins in rhythm with the coming and the going of these waves. But now they brought sound with them: a lark's clear trill; the soft murmur of a young birch in new leaf; a faint splashing in the river. A swallow circled giddily, somewhere very near, its light wings whistling; the swarming midges droned; and at intervals, over all else,

came the long and melancholy cry of a ploughman, urging on his oxen.

But the child could not grasp all these sounds together, in their oneness. He could not unite them, could not arrange them in proper perspective. They were all separate, coming into the sightless little head each by itself: some soft and vague, some loud, clear, deafening. Sometimes they all came at once, crowding unpleasantly on one another, in incomprehensible disharmony. And still the wind from the fields kept up its whistling in his ears. The waves came over him, faster, faster, and now their din dimmed all the other sounds, making them seem to rise from some other world than this—like memories of days already past. And as the sounds grew dimmer, a tingling lassitude seemed to pour into the childish breast. The boy's face twitched in the rhythm of these waves coming over him. His eyes closed, opened, closed again. His brows came into uneasy movement. Every feature showed his questioning, his arduous effort of brain and of imagination. Childish and weak as yet, and overburdened with new impressions, his consciousness began to tire. It still

struggled, still tried to cope with the sensations and impressions flooding in upon it from every side—to keep its balance among them, to merge them into some sort of oneness and thus to master, to conquer them. But the task was too great for the child's unlit brain, deprived of the aid of visual perception.

And the sounds kept coming, flying, falling one over another; and they were still so ringing, all of them, and so unlike. The waves came rolling with greater and greater tension, coming up from the clamorous darkness around the child and going off into that same darkness, to be followed by new waves, and new sounds. Faster, higher, more and more torturing, lifting him, rocking him, lulling him. And again, over all this dimming chaos, the long and melancholy human cry. And then all was still.

Moaning softly, the child fell back into the grass. The mother turned, and cried out in alarm. He lay still in the grass, his face blanched. He had fainted.

VIII

Uncle Maxim was very much alarmed by this development. He had been ordering books on physiology, psychology, and pedagogy, of late, and had thrown himself with his usual energy into the study of all that science had to offer concerning the mystery of a child's soul, its growth and development.

These new studies had more and more absorbed him, and as a result the old grim thoughts of his unfitness for life's struggle —"a burden for the baggage train", "a trampled worm, grovelling in the dust"— had long since been aired out of his square-hewn head. In their place had come a thoughtful interest—even, at times, rainbow dreams, that warmed his aging heart. Nature, he realised more and more clearly, while depriving his little nephew of sight, had yet been kind to him in other things. To all impressions from the outer world accessible to his senses, the child responded with remarkable fullness and vigour. And Uncle Maxim felt it his mission to develop the child's native abilities; to exert his own intelligence and influence in

an attempt to counterbalance the blind injustice of fate; to fill his empty place in the ranks with a new fighter for life's cause, a recruit not to be swayed by any influence but his.

Who could tell?—the old Garibaldian reflected. The spear and the sword, after all, were not the only means of struggle. Some day, perhaps, this child whom fate had so unjustly slighted would turn whatever weapon he might master to the defence of other unfortunates, victims of life's injustice. And then the crippled old soldier would not have lived in vain.

Even emancipated minds, back in the 'forties and 'fifties, were not altogether free of superstitious belief in that "mystery of Nature" known as predestination. It is hardly to be wondered, then, that as the child developed, evincing remarkable ability, Uncle Maxim came to regard his very blindness as a clear sign of such "predestination".

Yes, "Fate's victim, for the victims of Fortune"—such was the device that he would choose for his fosterling's battle standard.

IX

For several days after that first spring outing the boy lay in his bed, delirious. And in all that time, whether he lay still and silent, or tossed and murmured, or seemed to be listening for something, that strange expression of bewilderment never left his face.

"Really," the young mother said, "he looks as if he were trying to understand something, and couldn't."

Uncle Maxim nodded thoughtfully. He realised that the child's strange uneasiness, and his sudden swoon, had been caused by a too great profusion of new impressions, which had overtaxed his imagination. Now, when the child began to convalesce, it was decided that these new impressions be admitted to him only gradually—piecemeal, as it were. At first the windows in his room were kept tight shut. Then, as he grew stronger, they would be opened now and again, for a short while at a time. Later, when he could walk, the mother took him about the house, then out to the porch, then down into the garden. And whenever the look of

distress came into his face, she would explain to him what caused these sounds he could not understand.

"That's a shepherd's horn, off beyond the woods," she would say. "And there's a robin—you can hear it through the chirping of the sparrows. And now the stork's clattering its bill, up on its wheel. [In the Ukraine, and also in Poland, people set up old cart-wheels for storks to nest on, at the top of tall posts. It only got back the other day, from oh! such distant lands, and now it's building its nest in the same place as last year."

The child would nod and press her hand, his face glowing with gratitude. And his expression, as he listened to the sounds around him, would be one of thoughtful, understanding interest.

Now he began to put questions about everything that caught his attention; and his mother or, more often, Uncle Maxim would tell him about the creatures or the objects that produced the sounds he heard. The mother's descriptions were more lively and vivid than Uncle Maxim's, and impressed themselves more sharply on the child's imagination; but they were often too great a strain upon his understanding.

The mother herself suffered. Her eyes would fill with helpless pain and sorrow. But, as best she could, she tried to give her child some understanding of shape and colour. The boy would sit listening intently, his eyebrows drawn, his forehead puckered in tiny furrows—his childish mind clearly straggling with a task beyond its power, his imagination striving fruitlessly to build up new concepts with the aid of what she tried to tell him. Uncle Maxim always frowned at these scenes; and when tears rose in the mother's eyes, and the boy turned pale with his effort to understand, Maxim would break in, silence his sister, and begin to talk himself, wherever possible confining his explanations to concepts of space and sound. The look of strain would fade from the child's face.

"Is it big, then? How big is it?"

They had been talking about the stork that stood lazily clattering its bill, up on its wheel.

He spread out his arms, as he always did when asking about the size of things, for Uncle Maxim to stop him when they were far enough apart. But his little arms

went out and out, and still Uncle Maxim said:

"No, it's bigger than that. Much bigger. If we took it into the house and set it down on the floor, its head would reach higher than the backs of the chairs."

"So big!" the boy responded musingly. "But a robin, it's only like this"—and he brought his palms almost together.

"Yes, a robin's like that. But then, you see, the big birds never sing so well as the tiny ones do. Robins try hard to make everyone like their singing. Whereas a stork is a serious bird. Stands on one leg, up there in its nest, looking around it like a surly master watching over his servants, and grumbling just as loud as ever it pleases. It doesn't care a snap if its voice is hoarse, or if strangers happen to hear."

The boy would laugh merrily at such tales, and forget the distress and strain of his efforts to understand his mother's stories. But—it was those stories that attracted him, and he turned to his mother with his questions, rather than to his uncle.

Chapter Two

I

The child's world broadened. His sensitive hearing told him more and more of Nature. But darkness, deep, impenetrable, hung as always over and around him—a black cloud, weighing heavily upon his brain. It had hung over him from the day of his birth, and he might surely have grown accustomed, resigned to his misfortune. But he was not resigned. There was some instinct in his childish being that strove ceaselessly for freedom from the blackness. And this subconscious, but unintermittent quest for the light that he had never seen left its imprint more and more deeply on his face, in an expression of undefined and tortured effort.

Still, he too had his moments of unclouded pleasure, his bright childish raptures. These came when some powerful impression, accessible to his senses, brought him new knowledge of the unseen

world. For Nature, in her might and grandeur, did not remain entirely a closed book to the blind child.

There was the day when they took him to a high rock overhanging the river, and he stood listening, with an altogether new expression, to the faint splashings of the water far below; and then the sound of the pebbles rolling from underfoot, dropping down the side of the rock, made him clutch at his mother's skirts with sinking heart. Always, afterwards, the concept of depth was associated in his mind with the murmur of water at the foot of the rock and the frightened scamper of falling pebbles.

Distance, to him, was the slow fading away of a song into nothingness. And when spring thunder rolled across the sky, filling all space with its rumbling, and then retiring, with a final wrathful roar, behind the clouds—at such moments the blind child would stand listening in reverent awe. His heart would swell, and in his mind would rise a poignant sense of the majesty and sweep of the heavenly vault above him.

Sound was thus the chief medium by which the outer world could reach his

understanding. The impressions received through other senses served only to supplement his sound impressions, in which all his ideas of the world were shaped.

Sometimes, when the day was at its hottest, and all sounds were stilled; when human activity came to a standstill, and Nature lay in that peculiar hush in which one can sense no movement but the unceasing, soundless flow of vital energy—at such hours, sometimes, a new expression would transform the blind boy's face. It was as though he were listening, with strained attention, to sounds that none but he could hear—sounds rising from within, from the very depths of his being, called to the surface by the great stillness without. Watching his face, at such times, one had the impression that some dim thought was sounding in his heart in melody—vague as yet, and unformed.

II

He was in his fifth year, thin and weakly. Indoors, he moved, even ran, about the rooms with perfect freedom. A strange, seeing how confidently he walked—never hesitating at a turn, never at a loss to find things that he wanted—might not have realised that he was blind; might have taken him simply for an unusually contemplative child, with dreamy eyes that seemed to look far out into vague distances. Out of doors, however, things were not so easy. He walked with a stick, feeling the ground with it before every step he took. When he had no stick, he would get down on hands and knees and crawl, swiftly investigating with his fingers every object encountered in his path.

III

It was a quiet summer evening. Uncle Maxim was out in the garden. The child's father, as usual, was still away in some distant field. Everything was still. The village was sinking into sleep, and the talk in the servants' hall had died away. The

child had been put to bed half an hour past.

He lay in his room, only half-asleep. For some days, now, the very thought of this quiet evening hour had called strange memories to his mind. He could not see the darkening sky, of course; could not see the swaying tree-tops outlined in black against its starry velvet, or the shadows that gathered under the shaggy eaves of barns and stable, or the blue blackness creeping over the earth, or the glinting gold of moonbeams and starlight. Yet, day after day, he would drop off to sleep under some beautiful spell that, in the morning, he could not explain.

It would come at the hour when sleep began to dull his senses, when he no longer consciously heard the murmur of the beeches at his window, or the distant barking of the village dogs, or the trilling of the nightingale beyond the river, or the mournful tinkle of tiny bells where a colt was grazing in the meadow; when all individual sounds seemed to fade and vanish. Merged in new, soft harmony, they would now seem to come again, all these sounds, and hover in his room, filling his heart with vague, but very pleasant

fancies. When morning came, he would wake in a softened, tender mood, and question his mother eagerly:

"What was it, last night? What was it?"

The mother could not answer. Perhaps, she thought, the child had been having dreams. She would put him to bed herself, every evening, bless him devoutly, and linger by his side until he seemed asleep. She never noticed anything out of the ordinary. Yet, in the morning, he would speak again of a pleasant something experienced the night before:

"It was so fine, so fine! What was it, Mother?"

And so, this evening, she had decided to stay in the child's room and watch, in the hope of finding some solution to this riddle. She sat quietly beside the bed, knitting mechanically, listening to little Petro's even breathing. Soon he seemed fast asleep. But suddenly she heard him whisper through the darkness:

"Are you still here, Mother?"

"Yes, Petro."

"Do go away. It's afraid of you, and it doesn't come. I was almost asleep already, and it doesn't come."

This plaintive, sleepy whisper brought a strange feeling to the mother's heart. He spoke so confidently of his fancies, as though of something very real! Still, she got up, bent over the bed to kiss the child, and slipped quietly out of the room. She would go around through the garden, she thought, and creep up unnoticed outside his open window.

And as she was coming through the garden the mystery was suddenly solved for her. The soft strains of a village pipe came floating from the stable: a simple, unembroidered melody, mingling with the night's soft murmurings. Yes, clearly, it must be this music, coming at the magic moments just before sleep, that gave the child such pleasant memories.

She paused awhile to listen, charmed by the tender Ukrainian melody, then turned back, her heart at ease, to join Uncle Maxim in the garden.

How well Iochim played! Strange, that such tender, delicate feeling should come from so seemingly coarse a fellow.

IV

Yes, Iochim played well. Of the exacting fiddle, even, he was master; and, time had been, none could play a Cossack dance better than he, or a gay Polish Krakowiak, at the tavern of a Sunday. There he would sit, on his bench in the corner, his fiddle tucked under his shaven chin, his tall sheepskin hat jauntily tilted; and when he brought his curved bow down on the taut, waiting strings, not many in the tavern could sit still. Even the aged, one-eyed Jew who accompanied Iochim on the double-bass would get tremendously excited. His shoulders would twitch, and his bald head, in its black skull-cap, sway, and the whole of his thin little frame mark time to the sprightly melody, while his clumsy instrument seemed to strain almost to breaking point in the effort to make its heavy bass keep up with the fiddle's swift, light treble. What, then, remains to be said of the baptized—whose legs have always been prone to tap and swing at the first hint of gay dance music?

But Iochim fell in love with Marya, a servant girl on a neighbouring estate. And

soon the merry fiddle lost all its charm for him. True, it had failed to win him cruel Marya's heart. She preferred a German valet's shaven features to the Ukrainian stableman's moustache and music. And from the day that Marya made her choice, Iochim's fiddle was never heard again at the tavern, nor yet at the young folks' evening gatherings. He hung the once-loved instrument on a peg on the stable wall, and did not seem to care when, one by one, what with the dampness and his neglect, its strings all snapped—snapped with such a loud and piteous twanging that even the horses neighed in sympathy and turned to stare at the fiddle's hard-hearted master.

From a Carpathian mountaineer passing through the village, Iochim bought a wooden pipe to replace his fiddle. Perhaps he felt that the pipe's sweet, plaintive tones would be more appropriate to his bitter lot, more expressive of the melancholy that filled his rejected heart. But the mountain pipe failed to satisfy his need. He tried others—a good half-score of them. He did everything a man could do: scraped them, whittled them, soaked them in water and dried them in the sun, hung

them up where the wind could blow at them from every side. But nothing did any good. The mountain pipes would not express the grief of his Ukrainian heart. They whistled when they should have sung, and squealed when he tried to make them hum. They simply would not lend themselves to Iochim's mood. And so, in the end, he flew into a temper and declared that there wasn't a mountaineer in the world who could make a decent pipe. No, he would have to make his pipe himself, with his own hands.

For days he wandered, frowning, through the fields and marshes. At every clump of willow he would pause, to pick and choose among the branches. Here and there, he would cut a branch or two; but none of them seemed really to satisfy him. His frown never relaxed, and he did not drop his search. But then he came upon a quiet river pool, where the lazy current barely swayed the white cups of the water-lilies, and luxuriant growths of willow, bending dreamily over the still, dark depths, kept out every breeze. Iochim pushed through the willows to the river-bank, and stood a while, looking about him. And suddenly—he could not have said

why—he knew that here he would find what he had been seeking. His face cleared, and he pulled his clasp-knife free of its strap inside his boot-top. After a searching look up and down the line of rustling bushes, he made his choice, and strode up to a straight, slender trunk at the very edge of the steep bank. He flipped it with his finger, and watched it sway, lithe and resilient; listened a while to the murmur of its leaves, and threw back his head in pleasure.

"There it is," he mumbled happily. And all the other branches he had cut went flying down into the water.

The pipe turned out wonderfully well.

First he dried the willow bole. Then he burnt out its heart with a red-hot wire; burnt six round holes in its side, and cut a seventh, slanted opening; and plugged one end tight with a bit of wood, with a narrow, slanted slit in it. He hung the pipe up out of doors, and let it hang a whole week for the sun to warm and the wind to cool. And when he took it down he shaped it carefully with his knife, and smoothed it with glass, and gave it a good rubbing with a bit of coarse woollen cloth. At the top he made it round; but the lower half was

faceted, and on the facets, with the aid of twisted bits of iron, he burnt all sorts of interlaced designs. When all was done, he tried a swift scale or two—and, with a muffled exclamation, hid the pipe hurriedly away in a safe corner, by his bed. No, it was not for the bustling daylight hours—his first trial of its worth. But when evening fell, its music came pouring from the stable— tender, dreamy, vibrant. Iochim was satisfied. The pipe responded as though it were a part of his own being. Its music seemed to issue from his own warm, grieving heart.

Every turn, every shade in his sorrow sounded in this wonderful pipe, to fly, note by note, into the still, listening evening.

V

Now Iochim was in love with his pipe, and celebrating his honeymoon with it. Through the day he did his work as always —watered the horses, harnessed them when needed, drove for Pani Popelskaya or for Uncle Maxim; and at times, when he

glanced in the direction of the neighbouring village, where the cruel Mary a lived, his heart would be very heavy. But when evening came all the world would be forgotten, and even the thought of Marya's dark eyes would haze over, somehow, losing its searing reality—would hover in a sort of misty veil, only so far perceived as to lend a wistful, dreamy flavour to the music of the wonderful new pipe.

And so, one evening, Iochim lay on his bed in the stable, in this state of musical ecstasy, pouring out his whole soul in vibrant melodies. He had altogether forgotten the hardhearted beauty—had forgotten, almost, his own existence—when suddenly he started, and sat up abruptly. Just as the music was at its sweetest, a tiny hand had brushed lightly, swiftly down his face, and over his hands, to the pipe. On the pipe it stopped, fingering it in eager haste. There was something alive, right there beside Iochim. He could hear the quick, excited breathing.

"The Lord preserve us!" he gasped—the usual formula for exorcising the powers of

evil; and, to make sure, demanded sternly, "God's, or Satan's?"

But a moonbeam, glinting in at the open stable door, soon showed him his error. Beside the rough bed, his little hands eagerly extended, stood the manor folks' blind boy.

It was an hour or so later that the mother tiptoed into the nursery, to see how little Petro slept. His bed was empty. For a moment she was badly frightened; but she quickly guessed where the boy might be.

Iochim was very much abashed when, laying down his pipe for a breathing spell, he suddenly noticed his "gracious pani" in the stable doorway. She had evidently been standing there some time, listening to his music and watching her boy, who sat on Iochim's bed, wrapped in a big sheepskin jacket, still listening eagerly for the interrupted music.

VI

From that time on, Petro went out to the stable every evening. It never occurred to him to ask Iochim to play in the day-time. To his mind, evidently, the bustle and movement of the daylight hours excluded all thought of these gentle melodies. But as evening drew on the child would be seized with a feverish impatience. Tea, and then supper, were of significance only as signs that the eagerly awaited time was near. And though the mother felt an unreasoning, instinctive dislike for this attraction that drew him so strongly, she could not forbid her darling the pleasure of spending the evening hours, before he was put to bed, listening to Iochim's music in the stable. These hours were now the happiest the child knew. The evening's impressions, as the mother saw with searing jealousy, would remain with him all through the following day. Not even her caresses could evoke his former undivided response. Even when he nestled in her arms, his dreamy look would show that he was thinking of Iochim's music.

It was then that she recalled her own musical accomplishments. It was not so many years, after all, since she had come out of boarding school—Pani Radetskaya's

establishment, in Kiev, where, among other "pleasant arts", she had been taught to play the piano. True, this was not too pleasant a memory; for it involved a lively recollection of Fraulein Klapps, the music teacher, an elderly German spinster, hopelessly thin, and hopelessly prosaic, and—what was worst of all—hopelessly cross. She had been very skilful, this acid-tempered lady, at "breaking in" her pupils' fingers and making them flexible; and wonderfully successful, too, in murdering any feeling the girls might have had for the poesy of music. That is a timid feeling, often; and Fraulein Klapps' very presence would have been enough to frighten it away—not to speak of her methods of teaching. And so, after leaving school, young Anna Yatsenko had never had the slightest inclination to go on playing. Nor had this changed with marriage. But now, as she listened to the music this simple Ukrainian peasant drew from his pipe, a new feeling—a lively feeling of melody—began to grow in her heart, side by side with her growing jealousy; and the memory of the German spinster began to fade. And, in the end, Pani Popelskaya asked her husband to buy her a piano.

"As you wish, my love," replied this model husband. "I had thought you weren't fond of music."

The order was sent off that very day. But it would take two or three weeks, at the least, before the piano could be purchased and brought out from town.

And still the pipe trilled its summons every evening; and the boy would run off to the stable without even stopping to ask permission.

The stable smelled of horses, fresh, fragrant hay, and leather harness. The horses would stand quietly munching, with an occasional rustle as they nosed at the hay in their mangers. When the pipe fell silent for a moment, the murmur of the beeches in the garden would come clearly through the evening hush. Petro would sit motionless, as under a charm, drinking in the music.

He would never interrupt. But whenever the music stopped, if it was more than for a minute or two, his charmed listening would give way to a strange, eager excitement. He would stretch out his hands for the pipe, and, with trembling fingers, press it to his lips; but his breath would come so short, in his eagerness, that

at first he could produce only faint, quivering trills. Later, little by little, he began to master the simple instrument. Iochim would place his fingers, showing him how to produce each different tone; and, though his tiny hand could barely reach .across the row of finger holes, he soon learned how all the notes were placed. Each note, to him, had its own countenance, its own individual nature. He knew, now, in which of the holes it lived, and how to bring it out. And often, when Iochim was playing some simple tune, the child's fingers would move in unison with his teacher's. He had gained a clear conception of the notes of the scale, their sequence and their location.

VII

Three weeks passed, and, at long last, the piano arrived. Petro stood in the yard, listening intently to the bustle. It must be very heavy, this "imported music", for the wagon creaked when the men started to lift it, and the men themselves kept

grunting, and their breath came loud and laboured. Now they moved towards the house, with heavy, measured step. And at each step something above them hummed and moaned and tinkled in the strangest way. Then they set this queer "music" down in the drawing-room, and again it made that deep, dull, humming sound—as though it were threatening someone, in passionate anger.

All this induced a feeling very near to fright, and did not incline the child in favour of the new arrival—inanimate, perhaps, but clearly not sweet-tempered. He wandered away into the garden. There, he did not hear the workmen setting up the instrument in the drawing-room; did not hear the tuner, summoned from town, trying the keys and adjusting the wire strings. Only when all was ready did his mother send for him.

Now Anna Mikhailovna was ready to celebrate her triumph over the simple village pipe. Her piano came from Vienna, and it was the work of a famed master. Surely, now, Petro would stop running to the stable. Once again, all his joys would have their source in his mother. With a gay smile in her eyes, she watched the child

come timidly into the room, with Uncle Maxim; gaily, she glanced at Iochim, who had asked permission to come and hear the "foreign music", and now stood bashfully in the doorway, his eyes on the floor, his forelock dangling. When Maxim and the child had settled themselves to listen, she brought her hands down suddenly on the piano keys.

It was a piece she had mastered brilliantly at Pani Radetskaya's boarding school, under the guidance of Fraulein Klapps. A tremendously loud composition, and quite complicated, demanding great flexibility in the player's fingers. At the public examination before leaving school, Anna Mikhailovna had earned herself—and particularly her teacher—great praise by her performance of this difficult work. And, though no one could be sure, of course, there were many who suspected that her capture of quiet Pan Popelsky had been accomplished precisely in the brief fifteen minutes it had taken her to play her piece. Today, she played it in the hope of quite another victory—to win back her old place in her son's little heart, beguiled from her by the love of a peasant pipe.

This time, however, her hopes were in vain. The piano came from Vienna; but it could not contend with a bit of Ukrainian willow. True, the piano had great advantages: costly wood, the finest of strings, the wonderful craftsmanship of its Viennese maker, the broad range of tone that it afforded. But the Ukrainian pipe had allies, too; for here it was in its own homeland, surrounded by its native Ukrainian countryside.

Until Iochim cut it with his knife, and burnt out its heart with red-hot wire, it had stood swaying on the bank of a little river the child knew and loved. It had been warmed by the same Ukrainian sun as he, and cooled by the same Ukrainian wind, until that day when the sharp eye of a Ukrainian piper had spied it out on its high bank. And, too, it was the harder for the foreign instrument to conquer the simple village pipe, in that the pipe had first sung to the blind child in the quiet hour when sleep was stealing over him—through the mysterious whisperings of evening, and the drowsy murmur of the beeches, with all Ukraine's Nature as accompaniment.

Nor could Pani Popelskaya rival Iochim. True, her slender fingers were swifter than

his, and more flexible, and the melody she played more intricate and colourful; and Fraulein Klapps had laboured earnestly to help her pupil master the difficult instrument. But Iochim had a native feeling for music. He loved and grieved, and in his love and grief turned to Nature for comfort. It was Nature that taught him his simple melodies: the murmur of the woods, the soft whisperings of the grass-grown steppelands; these, and the old, old songs, so infinitely dear, that had been sung to the rocking of the cradle when he was still a baby.

No, it was not so easy for the Viennese piano to conquer the simple Ukrainian pipe. Hardly a minute had passed before Uncle Maxim thumped loudly on the floor with his crutch. And, turning, Anna Mikhailovna saw on her son's pale face the same expression it had worn when he fell back into the grass on that memorable day of their first spring outing.

Iochim looked pityingly at the child, and —with a contemptuous glance at the "German music"—strode out of the house, his clumsy boots clattering loudly across the floor.

VIII

This failure cost the poor mother many tears—tears, and shame. That she, "gracious Pani" Popelskaya, whom "the best society" had thunderously applauded—that she should be so cruelly defeated! And by whom? By that coarse stableman, Iochim, and his idiotic pipe! The angry blood came rushing to her face at the very thought of the contempt she had glimpsed in his eyes after her unfortunate concert. With all her heart, she hated "that horrid peasant".

Yet every evening, when her little one ran off to the stable, she would open her window and stand listening. At first it was with contempt and anger that she listened, seeking only to pick out the comic aspects of this "silly piping". But then, little by little—she could not herself have said how it came about—the silly piping began to hold her attention, and she would listen eagerly for the wistful, dreamy melodies. Sometimes, catching herself at this, she would wonder what it was that made them

so attractive, that gave them their mysterious charm. And as time passed her question found its answer, in the blue of these summer evenings, in the blurred shadows of the twilight hours, in the amazing harmony of song and surrounding Nature.

Yes—she reflected, altogether conquered now—this music had something about it all its own, a genuine depth of feeling, a poetry and charm never to be mastered simply by rote.

True, very true. The secret of this poetry lay in the wonderful tie that binds the long-dead past with Nature, witness of this past—Nature, that never dies, and never ceases to sing to the heart of man. And Iochim, a coarse, horny-handed peasant, in clumsy boots, carried in his heart this wonderful harmony, this genuine feeling of Nature.

And Pani Popelskaya's aristocratic pride was humbled, in her heart, before this peasant stableman. She would forget his coarse clothing, and the smell of tar that hung about him—would remember nothing, through his soft melodies, but the kindly face, the gentle grey eyes, the bashful humour of the smile, half-hidden

by the drooping moustache. There were still moments, however, when the angry blood would flush her cheeks; for she could not but feel that, in the struggle to win her child's interest, she had put herself on an equal footing with this peasant, in his own field, and the peasant had won.

But, day after day, the trees murmured overhead, and evening lit the stars in the dark blue of the sky and poured soft, blue-black shadow over the earth; and, day after day, Iochim's songs poured their warm melancholy into the young mother's heart. More and more, she submitted to their power; more and more, she learned to understand the secret of their simple, unaffected, untainted poetry.

IX

Yes, Iochim's power lay in the depth, the truth of his emotion. And she—had she no share of such emotion? Why, then, did her heart burn so, and beat so wildly in her

breast? Why could she not keep back the tears?

Was it not true feeling—the burning love that filled her heart for her afflicted child? Yet he kept running from her side to be with Iochim, and she knew no way of giving him such pleasure as Iochim could give.

The hot tears would flow at every remembrance of that look of pain her music had brought into his face; and there were moments when she could barely repress the sobs that choked and tore her.

Unhappy mother! Her child's blindness had become her own incurable affliction. It was this that caused her exaggerated, almost morbid tenderness; this, engrossing her whole being, that rent her poor, sore heart by a thousand unseen ties at every sign of suffering in the child. And it was this that made her strange rivalry with a peasant piper—a thing that could ordinarily have caused no more than faint annoyance or chagrin—the source of such extravagant, such cruel suffering.

The passing days brought her no relief. But each day did bring definite gain. More and more, she began to sense within herself the rise of that same feeling of

melody, of poetry, that charmed her so in Iochim's playing. And with this new feeling came new hope. There were evenings when she hastened to the piano, in sudden confidence—determined, with its ringing chords, to drown out the gentle pipe. But, every time, a sense of fear and shame restrained her from the attempt, turning her confidence into irresolution. She would recall the pain in her child's face, and the peasant's contemptuous look—and her cheeks would burn with shame in the dark drawing-room, and her hands flutter in timid longing over the silent keyboard, that she dared not touch.

Yet, as day succeeded day, she felt an increasing sense of a new power within her. And she began to try herself, at hours when the child was out walking, or playing by himself in some far corner of the garden. Her first attempts did not satisfy her. Her hands would not play what her heart felt. The sounds they produced seemed altogether alien to her mood. Gradually, however, the mood began to come through, with ever greater power and ease. The peasant's lessons had not been in vain; and the mother's poignant love, her sensitive perception of just what

it was that had won her child's heart so completely, helped her to master these lessons quickly. Now her fingers no longer drummed out noisy, complicated "pieces". Gentle melodies flowed from the keyboard, plaintive Ukrainian dumkas, filling the shuttered rooms, throbbing in the mother's heart.

And, at last, she gained the courage to enter into open struggle. A strange contest began, in the evening hours, between the drawing-room and Iochim's stable. As the soft trilling of the pipe began to float from the shadowed, straw-thatched stable, new sounds, full, resonant, would float out to meet it from the open windows of the drawing-room, glittering through the beeches in the bright moonlight.

Neither the child nor Iochim, at first, would listen to the "artful" manor music, so strongly were they prejudiced against it. The boy would frown at every pause in Iochim's piping, and cry impatiently,

"Why don't you play?"

But after a day or two of this Iochim's pauses became more and more frequent. Again and again he would lay down his pipe to listen, with rapidly increasing interest. The boy, too, began to listen, and

no longer urged his friend to play. And a moment came when Iochim said wonderingly,

"Hear that, now—isn't it fine!"

And, still listening raptly, he took up the child and carried him through the garden to the open window of the drawing-room.

He thought that the "gracious paпi" was playing for her own pleasure, and would not notice that she had listeners. But Anna Mikhailovna, too, had been listening, in pauses, for her rival, Iochim's pipe. She had noticed that it played no more. She saw her victory, and her heart beat high with joy.

With victory, all remnant of her anger at Iochim vanished. She was happy, and realised that she owed her happiness to him; for it was he who had taught her to win back her child. And if, now, she could give the child a wealth of new impressions, they would both have their teacher, the peasant piper, to thank.

X

The ice had been broken. The next day the boy ventured, timid, but curious, into the drawing-room, which he had not entered since the day the strange new-comer, so noisy and bad-tempered, as it seemed to him, had been established there. The new-comer's songs, last evening, had conquered his delicate ear and overcome his prejudice. With only a faint trace of his earlier fear, he came towards the piano. A step or two away he paused, and stood listening. There was no one there. The mother, sewing in an adjoining room, watched him breathlessly, admiring his every movement, every change of expression in his nervous features.

From where he stood, he stretched out a hand and touched the polished surface of the piano—and at once drew timidly away. He tried again, and once again—then came up closer and began to examine the instrument carefully, moving all around it, bending to the floor to follow the lines of its legs. And finally his fingers touched the keys.

A faint, hesitant note trembled in the air. The boy stood listening long after all sound had vanished to the mother's ear.

Then, absorbed, expectant, he pressed another key. After that, his hand swept across the keyboard, and he struck a new note, in the highest register. He let each tone sound, and tremble, and die away before he touched another; and, as he listened, his face expressed not only intense interest, but enjoyment. He seemed to take pleasure in each individual note, with an artist's sensitive receptiveness to the elements of music, to the separate components of potential melody.

But in each note, besides its sound, the blind boy seemed to feel other distinctive features. When his fingers pressed a clear, joyful note of the upper register, his face, bright with pleasure, would turn upwards, as though following the airy sound in its skyward flight. When he struck a bass note, he would tilt his head downwards to catch the deep vibration, as though feeling that this heavy note must roll low, low, over the very floor, to vanish in the farthest corners of the house.

XI

Uncle Maxim's attitude to all this musical experimentation was barely tolerant. Strange as it might seem, he could not altogether reconcile himself to the boy's leanings, so clearly manifested. On the one hand, of course, this passionate love of music indicated unquestionable talent, and pointed the way to an attainable future. But—on the other hand, the thought of such a future brought the old soldier a feeling of obscure disappointment.

Music, of course, was a great power too, he reflected. With music, one could sway the heart of the mob. Hundreds of fine ladies and dressed-up dandies would crowd to hear the blind musician. He would play them all sorts of ... um ... waltzes, and nocturnes (to tell the truth, Uncle Maxim's knowledge of music hardly went beyond this conception of "waltzes" and "nocturnes"), and they would dry their tears with lacy handkerchiefs. Ah, the devil damn it! That was not what Uncle Maxim had been hoping for. But—what was to be done? The boy was blind. Let him do what

he could best succeed in. Only, if it had to be music, let it be song, at least. Song reached deeper than a mere meaningless tickling of the sensitive ear. A song told a story; it aroused the mind to thought, and the heart to courage.

"Look here, Iochim," Maxim exclaimed one evening, coming into the stable with Petro, "can't you drop that pipe of yours for once? It's well enough for shepherd boys, but you're a grown man, after all, for all that silly Marya's made such a calf of you! Ugh! You ought to be ashamed—moping because a girl turned up her nose! Shrilling away on a pipe, like a bird in a cage!" Iochim grinned, in the darkness, at Pan-Maxim's causeless anger. Of all this irascible peroration, only the reference to shepherd boys aroused him to mild protest. "Don't you think it, Pan Maxim," he said. "You won't find such a pipe as this in all the Ukraine. Shepherd boys!

Whistles, that's all they know how to make. A pipe like this... Just you listen!"

He stopped all the finger holes and blew two notes in octave, beaming with pleasure at the full, clear tone. Maxim spat.

"Ugh! God in heaven! The fellow's lost all the brains he ever had! What do I care for your pipe? They're all alike—pipes, and women, and that Marya of yours to boot. Give us a song, if you know any. One of the good old songs.

There's some sense in that."

Ukrainian himself, Maxim Yatsenko was simple and unpretentious in his relations with the peasantry and the manor servants. He often shouted at them, true, but—inoffensively, somehow; and so they treated him with respect, but with no sign of fear.

"A song, is it?" Iochim returned. "Well, and why not? I used to sing, once, no worse than the next fellow. Only—our peasant songs—you might not like them, either."

This last was said with a hint of irony.

"Don't talk foolishness," Maxim exclaimed. "A good song—as if you could compare it with that piping of yours! If a man can sing, of course. Let's listen, then, Petro, while Iochim gives us a song. I wonder, though—will you understand it, youngster?"

"Will it be in serf talk?" the boy asked. "I understand that talk."

Uncle Maxim sighed. There was much of the romantic in his nature, and he had dreamed, once, of a revival of the old days of Cossack glory.

"Those are no serf songs, youngster," he told the child. "They're the songs of a free, strong people. Your mother's forefathers sang them, all through the steppes— along the Dnieper, and the Danube, and the Black Sea coast. Ah, well, you'll understand all that some day. What worries me now—" and his tone was suddenly uneasy—"what worries me now is quite a different thing."

Yes, it was a different understanding that he feared the boy might lack. The vivid pictures drawn by the old epic songs, he thought, could reach the heart only through visual concepts; and, lacking these, the boy's unseeing mind might be unable to master the language of folk poetry. But there was one thing Maxim had forgotten. Were not the ancient boyans, were not the Ukrainian kobzars and bandurists,* in their majority, blind? [Boyans, kobzars, bandurists—wandering minstrels.—Tr.] True, in many cases it was simply the misfortune that came with blindness that drove them to take up the

lyre or the bandura, as a means of begging alms. But not all, by far, of these wandering musicians were mere beggars, singing hoarsely for their bread. And not all of them, either, were old men when they lost their sight. Blindness blots out the visual world behind an impenetrable veil, that weighs down heavily, of course, upon the brain—an oppressive burden, hindering understanding. But there are things that come down by inheritance, and things that are learned through other senses and by other means than sight; and out of these things, for all the darkness, the brain creates a living world of its own —a shadowed world, perhaps; wistful, and melancholy; yet not devoid of a vague poetry.

XII

Maxim and Petro settled down on a heap of straw. Iochim stretched out on his bench (such being the pose best suited to his mood) and, after a moment's reflection, began to sing. His choice—whether

prompted by chance or by sensitive instinct—was very fortunate. It was a scene from the history of years long past:

> High, high on the hillside the reapers bend,
> Reaping the ripened grain....

No one, surely, who has once heard this wonderful folk song, sung as it should be sung, can forget its melody: an old, old tune, high pitched, unhurried, tinged with the melancholy of historical reminiscence. There are no events in this song, no battle and bloodshed, no heroic deeds. It tells no story of a Cossack's parting with his sweetheart, no tale of daring raids by land, or voyages along the Danube and across the rolling blue of the sea. There is nothing in all the song but a fleeting picture, rising for an instant in a Ukrainian's memory—a wistful fancy, a fragment of a dream of the historic past. It rises suddenly, amidst the grey commonplace of the present day—dim, misty, tinged with the peculiar melancholy that breathes from memories of the vanished past. Vanished—yes, but not without trace! It still lives, this past, in the tall grave mounds where the bones of

Cossack heroes lie buried, and where strange lights hover at midnight, and heavy groans are heard. It lives in legend, lives in this song, now less and less to be heard:

> High, high on the hillside the reapers bend,
> Reaping the ripened grain,
> And down below, down at the green hill's foot,
> The Cossacks go riding by,
> The Cossacks go riding by.

On the green hillside, grain is being reaped. Down below, Cossack troops are riding by.

Maxim Yatsenko forgot the world around him. The rueful melody, so wonderfully at one with the content of the song, brought the scene vividly before him: peaceful hillside fields, in the chastened evening light; the bent, silent figures of the reapers; and down below, silent too, the horsemen, rank upon rank, merging as they pass by with the evening shadows gathering in the valley.

> Doroshenko himself in the fore,

Leading his men, leading his Cossack troops,
Leading them bravely and well.

And the long-drawn-out notes rang and quavered and died away, only to ring once more, calling out of the darkness new and ever new figures of past history.

XIII

The boy's face, as he listened, was sad and thoughtful. When the song dwelt on the hillside, and the reaping of the grain, he felt himself at the top of a high rock he knew, overhanging the river. Yes, that was the place. He knew it by the splashing of the river down below, where the waves struck, barely audibly, against the stones. And he knew about the reaping, too. He could hear the sound of the sickles, and the rustle of the cut ears as they fell.

But when the song turned to what was happening down below, the blind child's imagination carried him down at once from the heights to the valley.

The sound of the sickles faded away; but the boy knew that the reapers were still there, up on the hillside. They were still there, but he could not hear them because they were up there so high, high as the pines whose rustling he could hear down at the foot of his rock. And here below, down at the riverside, came the quick, even beat of horses' hoofs. Many, many horses, their hoofbeats merging into dull thunder down here in the darkness. That was the Cossacks riding by.

The Cossacks—yes, he knew about them, too. "Old Cossack"—that was what everyone called old Fedko, when he turned up, from time to time, at the manor. Many a time, Fedko had held the blind boy on his knee and passed a trembling hand over his hair. And when the boy put up his own hand to feel Fedko's face, as he did with everyone, his sensitive fingers found deep furrows, and a long, drooping moustache, and sunken cheeks, wet with the involuntary tears of deep old age. That was the sort of Cossacks that he now imagined, down at the foot of the hill, as he listened to the song. Riding their horses—bent and old and long-moustached, like Fedko. Noiseless, shapeless shadows, advancing

through the darkness, weeping as Fedko always wept—weeping, perhaps, because of this moaning song that hung over hillside and valley: Iochim's mournful song of the "careless Cossack lad" who left his young wife for war's adversities, for a pipe smoked on the march.

It needed only a glance to convince Maxim that, blind though the child might be, his sensitive nature fully responded to the poetry of the song.

Chapter Three

I

Under Maxim's plan the blind boy was left, in everything possible, to fend for himself. The results were excellent. Indoors, he made no impression of helplessness at all. He moved about confidently, and kept his room neat, and his clothes and toys in order. So far as was feasible, too, Maxim introduced physical exertion. The boy had a regular system of exercises; and when he was five Maxim gave him a little horse, a mild and harmless creature. The mother could not imagine, at first, how her blind child could possibly ride. It was pure madness, she told her brother. But Maxim threw all his powers of persuasion into play, and in two or three months the boy was riding freely, needing Iochim's guidance only where the paths turned sharply.

Thus, his blindness was not allowed to hinder his physical development; and, to the best of human ability, its effect on his character, too, was minimised. He was a tall child for his age, and finely built; rather pale, with delicate and expressive features. His black hair accentuated his pallor, and his big, dark eyes, almost unmoving, gave his face a peculiar expression that people would notice at first glance, and wonder at. A tiny crease that cut across his forehead; a habit of keeping his head inclined a little forward; a look of sadness that sometimes clouded his handsome features—such were the only outward effects of his blindness. His movements, in familiar places, were free and confident. Yet it was easy to see that his natural liveliness was under constraint; and there were times when it burst through in nervous fits of some intensity.

II

Sound impressions had now definitely become dominant in the blind boy's life,

the chief form in which his thoughts were shaped, the focus of his mental processes. He would remember songs because their melodies won his heart; and their content, to him, would be coloured with the melancholy, or the merriment, or the dreaminess of their music. More attentively even than before, he listened for the voices of Nature around him. And, fusing his own sense impressions with the loved melodies that had surrounded him from childhood, he was able, at times, to express himself musically, in free improvisations in which it would have been difficult to pick out what was his own, and what taken from the folk songs he knew so well. Not even he himself could distinguish these two elements in his music—so wholly were they merged within him. His mother was teaching him to play the piano, and he was quick to master all her lessons; but he did not lose his love of Iochim's pipe. The piano was richer, fuller, stronger. But the piano was bound to the house, whereas the pipe could be carried along everywhere, and its music blended so completely with the steppe's soft breathing that Petro could not always have said what it was that brought the vague, new thoughts that

filled his mind—the wind from far places, or the music he himself was playing.

This passion for music became the core of the boy's mental development, bringing interest and variety into his life. Maxim took advantage of it to give the boy a knowledge of his country's history, woven of sound. His interest seized by a song, the child would learn about its heroes and their stories, and through these—the story of his motherland. This, in its turn, aroused an interest in literature. And when the boy was eight Maxim undertook his first regular instruction. He had made a special study of methods for teaching the blind, and the boy derived much pleasure from his lessons. They brought a new element into life, a positiveness and clarity that served as a balance to the more vague sensations of music.

Thus, the days were well occupied, and there was no lack of new impressions. The boy's life might have been thought as full as any child's can be. He seemed not even to realise his blindness.

And still, there was a strange, unchildlike melancholy in his nature, coming often to the surface. Maxim

attributed it to the lack of playmates, and did what he could to supply this need.

Little boys from the village were invited to come and play at the manor. But they were bashful and constrained. The unaccustomed surroundings—and, too, Petro's blindness—made them uncomfortable. They would huddle together, whispering timidly to one another when they could muster up the courage, and casting awed glances at the blind boy. Out of doors, in the garden or off in the fields, they would feel more at ease, and begin to play; but, somehow, Petro was always left out of these games. He could only listen, with wistful longing, to the merry tumult.

Sometimes Iochim would gather the children around him and tell them stories. He knew all sorts of jolly folk tales. The village youngsters, familiar from birth with the addle-pated imps and the artful witches of Ukrainian folklore, would break in with stories of their own, and the time would pass in lively talk and laughter. Petro always listened attentively, with evident interest; but he seldom smiled. Much of the humour, evidently, failed to reach him—and small wonder; for, after

all, he could not see the glint in Iochim's eyes, or the laughter in his very wrinkles, or the way he twitched his long, drooping moustache.

III

Shortly before the period we have been describing, there had been a change of possessor* on a small neighbouring estate.

[Under a rental system widely in use in the South-West Territory, the tenant (or "possessor", as he is called) is somewhat in the position of an estate manager. He pays the owner a definite sum; and what he himself will make on the estate, once that sum is paid, depends upon his own ability and enterprise.]

In place of the former troublesome occupant, with whom even quiet Pan Popelsky had been drawn into litigation over a field some cattle had trampled, the estate was now held by an elderly couple—one Pan Yaskulsky and his wife. These two, though their ages, put together, totalled over a hundred, had been married only a few years. Pan Yaskulsky had had a long, hard struggle, working as a steward on

other people's property, before he could get together enough money to rent an estate for his own use; and Panna Agnieszka, all those long years, had lived with the Countess Potocka, in the capacity of a more or less honorary lady's maid. So that, when their happy hour had struck at last, and they stood together before the altar, there had been as much grey as dark in the dashing bridegroom's hair and moustache, and the curls that framed the blushing face of the bride had begun to silver.

But the silver in their hair had not marred their conjugal felicity; and their belated love had borne fruit in an only daughter, of almost the same age as the blind boy.

Having attained for their old age a home that, conditionally at least, they might call their own, the aging couple had settled down in it to a simple, quiet life that might make up to them, in its peace and solitude, for their strenuous years of drudgery for others. Their first venture had not worked out too well, and they had had to try again, on this rather small estate. But here, too, they had settled down at once to their own way of life. With the willow branch and the

"thunder candle"* in the icon corner, by the ivy-twined images, Pani Yaskulskaya kept always a supply of herbs and roots, to treat her husband's ailments and those of the village folk who came to her for help. These herbs filled the whole house with a peculiar fragrance, which would come back invariably, even to chance visitors, at every recollection of the little home, so neat and clean and peaceful, or of the aging couple who had settled there, or of the tranquil life they lived—a strange life, somehow, in our day.

[*A wax candle that is lit during bad storms, or to be held by the dying.]

And with these two old people lived their only daughter— a little girl with sky-blue eyes, and long, fair hair that she wore braided down her back; a child of an uncommon staidness, in her whole little being, that immediately struck everyone who met her. It was as though the tranquillity of the parents' elderly love had come down to the daughter, finding expression in an unchildlike sobriety, a gentle quietness of movement, a look of thoughtfulness that never left the depths of her blue eyes. The little girl was never timid or shy with strangers. She did not

avoid other children, but joined willingly in their games. Yet, always, there was a sort of kindly condescension in her manner, as though—for herself—she had no need of such amusement. And, true enough, she could be perfectly happy all alone—wandering through the fields, gathering flowers, or talking to her doll, all with so sedate an air that she often seemed less a child than a tiny woman.

IV

Little Petro was out alone, on a low hillock by the river-bank. The sun was setting, and the evening was very still. There was no sound but the distant lowing of the village herd. The boy had been playing; but now he laid aside his pipe and threw himself back in the grass, yielding dreamily to the sweet lassitude of the summer evening. He was almost asleep when, suddenly, the hush was broken by light footsteps down below. Annoyed at this interruption, he raised himself on his

elbow to listen. The footsteps stopped at the bottom of his hillock. Unfamiliar steps.

"Little boy!" a child's voice called up to him. A girl's voice. "Who was playing here just now, do you know?"

Petro did not like such violations of his solitude, and it was none too cordially that he answered,

"That was me."

An exclamation of surprise burst from the little girl below.

"It was beautiful," she cried, in naive admiration.

Petro made no response. But his uninvited visitor did not leave.

"Why don't you go away?" he demanded at length, after waiting in vain for the sound of her retreating footsteps.

"Why do you want me to?" the girl returned, in that clear voice of hers, now naively wondering.

Her tranquil voice fell pleasantly on the blind boy's ears. But he declared, uncordially as before,

"I don't like people coming where I am."

The little girl laughed.

"Hear that!" she exclaimed. "Goodness me! Is all the earth yours, then, that you can forbid anyone to walk on it?"

"Mother tells everyone not to bother me here."

"Mother?" the little girl said slowly. "Well, but my mother lets me come out here to the river."

Petro had seldom encountered such persistent refusal to do as he wished. Indeed, he had been rather spoiled by the ease with which all yielded to his will. And now a wave of nervous anger passed over his face. He set up in the grass, crying excitedly, over and over,

"Go away! Go away! Go away!"

What might have happened next, it is hard to tell; but at this point Iochim's voice broke in, calling Petro to his tea, and the boy ran off.

"What a horrid little boy!"—were the last words he heard, called after him in a tone of heartfelt indignation.

V

On his hillock again, next day, Petro recalled this clash with no remnant of annoyance. He would even have liked to

have her here again—this little girl who spoke in so tranquil, so pleasant a voice. He had never heard a child's voice like that before. The children he knew were always shouting, or loudly laughing, or quarrelling, or crying. Not one of them ever talked so pleasantly as she did. He began to be sorry he had been rude to her. Now, he supposed, she would never come again.

Nor did she come, for three whole days. But on the fourth day Petro heard her footsteps again, down on the river-bank. She was walking slowly, humming some Polish song. The pebbles along the bank, as she trod on them, made little crunching noises.

"Hullo," Petro called, as she was passing by the hillock. "Is that you again?"

The little girl did not answer. The crunching of the pebbles continued. She walked on without a pause, humming her song with a deliberate carelessness in which Petro sensed her unforgotten injury.

A little past the hillock, however, she finally stopped. There was no sound at all for a moment or so, while she stood playing with some flowers she had gathered. Petro, waiting for her answer,

felt the tinge of deliberate disdain in her sudden pause and silence.

Only when her flowers were all arranged did she look up and ask, with a great air of dignity,

"Don't you see it's me?"

The simple question sent a bitter pang through the blind boy's heart. He did not answer. Only his hands, hidden in the grass, made a sudden convulsive movement.

But a beginning had been made.

"Who taught you to play the pipe so beautifully?" the little girl asked, still standing where she had stopped, and playing with her flowers.

"Iochim," Petro replied.

"It's beautiful! Only, what makes you so cross?"

"I ... I'm not cross with you," Petro said softly.

"Well, then, neither am I cross. Shall we play games?"

"I can't play games," he said, hanging his head.

"You can't play games? But why?"

"Because."

"No, but really, why?"

"Because," he repeated, barely audibly, hanging his head still lower.

He had never before had to speak so directly of his blindness, and the little girl's simplicity, the naive persistence with which she pressed her question, sent a new pang through his heart. The little girl climbed up the hillock and sat down beside him in the grass.

"You're awfully funny," she said condescendingly. "That's because you don't know me yet, I suppose. When we get acquainted, you won't be frightened any more. I'm never frightened, not of anyone."

As her clear, carefree little voice died away, Petro heard a soft rustling of stalks and leafage. She had dropped her flowers into her lap.

"You've been picking flowers," he said. "Where did you find them?"

"Over there," she returned, turning her head to indicate the direction.

"In the meadow?"

"No—over there."

"In the woods, then. What flowers are they?"

"Don't you know them? What a queer boy you are! Really, so queer!"

Petro took a flower, then another. Swiftly, lightly, his fingers caressed the leaves and blossoms.

"This is a buttercup," he said. "And here's a violet."

And then he had the wish to know his visitor in the same way. Leaning lightly on her shoulder, he lifted his hand to feel her hair, her eyes, the outlines of her face—pausing now and again, closely studying the unfamiliar features.

All this took place so suddenly, so swiftly, that at first the little girl was too amazed to protest. She sat staring at him silently, her wide eyes reflecting a feeling very close to horror. Only now did she notice that there was something very unusual about this boy. His pale, delicate face was set in an expression of strained attention that seemed out of keeping, somehow, with his unmoving gaze. His eyes looked away somewhere, at anything but what he was doing, and they reflected the gleam of the setting sun in the strangest way. For an instant, it all seemed to her a dreadful nightmare.

But then she wrenched her shoulder free and jumped to her feet, sobbing.

"Why do you frighten me so, you horrid boy?" she cried angrily, through the tears. "What harm have I done you?"

He sat there in the grass, altogether bewildered. His head fell, and a strange feeling, a mingling of humiliation and chagrin, filled his heart with pain. This was his first experience of the humiliation that is so often the cripple's lot: the realisation that his physical shortcoming may arouse not only compassion, but fear. He could not clearly analyse it, of course—this bitter feeling that oppressed him so; but its vagueness, his lack of lucid comprehension, in no way lessened the suffering that it brought.

A wave of searing pain rose to his throat. He threw himself down in the grass and broke into tears. His sobs grew more and more violent, shaking his whole little frame, the more so that, with inborn pride, he was trying his utmost to suppress them.

The little girl had run off down the hill; but now, hearing his sobs, she turned in surprise and looked back. And the sight of him, flat on his face in the grass, sobbing so bitterly, made her sorry for him. She came slowly up again, and bent over the weeping boy.

"Look here," she said softly, "what are you crying for? Afraid I'll tell? Well, then, I won't. Not anyone. Come, now, don't cry."

The kindly words, and the caressing tone, evoked a new and still more violent burst of sobbing. The little girl crouched beside him, and, after a moment, stroked his hair gently once or twice. Then, with the gentle insistence of a mother soothing her punished child, she lifted his head and began to dry his tear-wet eyes with her handkerchief.

"There, there, now," she murmured, as a woman might, "there's enough of that! I'm not angry any more, at all. I can see you're sorry that you frightened me."

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said, drawing a deep breath to keep down the nervous sobs.

"Well and good, then. I'm not angry any more. You'll never do such a thing again, I know you won't!"

She tugged at his shoulders, trying to make him sit up beside her.

He obeyed her tugging hands. Now he sat facing the sunset, as before; and when the little girl looked into his face, lit by the crimson glow, she felt again that there was something strange about it. The boy's

lashes were still wet with tears; but his eyes, behind the lashes— they were so unmoving! His face still twisted in nervous spasms; yet, at the same time, it expressed such deep, unchildlike, such oppressive sorrow!

"But just the same, you're awfully queer," she said, wonderingly, but sympathetically.

"No, I'm not queer," the boy returned, his face twisting pitifully. "I'm not queer. I ... I'm blind."

"Bli-ind?" she cried—and her voice quivered, as though this grievous word, that the boy had said so softly, had struck a cruel blow to her little woman's heart, a blow that no words of comfort could ever efface.

"Bli-ind?" she repeated. Her voice broke altogether, and, as though seeking refuge from the flood of pity that swept through all her little being, she suddenly threw her arms about the blind boy's neck and pressed her face to his.

The shock of this grievous discovery dispelled all trace of the tiny woman's usual staid dignity, transforming her into a hurt child, helpless in her pain. And now it

was she who burst into bitter, inconsolable weeping.

VI

A few minutes passed.

The little girl stopped crying, except for an occasional sob that she could not altogether stifle. Through a haze of tears, she watched the setting sun. It seemed to be turning, turning, in the incandescent air, as it sank slowly beyond the dark line of the horizon. Now its fiery edge flashed gold again, and a few last blazing sparks flew out; and suddenly the dark outline of the distant forest swam forward in a jagged line of blue.

A cool breath came up from the river. The peace of approaching evening found its reflection in the blind boy's face. He sat with bowed head, perplexed, it seemed, by this hot outpouring of sympathy.

"I feel so sorry," the little girl said, at last, in explanation of her weakness. She was still choking down the rising sobs.

When she had mastered her voice, she made an effort to turn the talk to some indifferent topic, of which they might both speak without emotion.

"The sun's gone down," she murmured.

"I don't know what the sun is like," he answered wistfully.

"I can only ... only feel it."

"Not know the sun?"

"Not what it's like."

"But ... but, then ... well, don't you know your mother, either?"

"I do know Mother. I can always tell her step, from a way off."

"That's so. I always know Mother, too, even if I keep my eyes tight shut."

The talk was calmer now.

"You know," Petro said, brightening a little, "I can feel the sun, after all, and I always know when it sets."

"How can you tell?"

"Well, you see ... well, it's... I can't exactly tell you, how."

"Oh," the little girl returned, evidently perfectly satisfied with his explanation.

Neither spoke for a moment or two. It was Petro who broke the silence.

"I can read," he announced. "And I'll soon learn to write with pen and ink."

"But how..." she began, and broke off suddenly, feeling that this might be too delicate a topic.

Petro understood what she had meant to ask.

"I read in a special book," he said. "With my fingers."

"With your fingers? I'd never be able to! Why, I read badly enough, even with my eyes. Father says women aren't made for learning."

"I can read French, too."

"French! With your fingers! How clever of you," she cried, in genuine admiration. "But look, I'm so afraid you'll be catching cold. There's a great mist coming up along the river."

"What about you, then?"

"I'm not afraid. The mist can't hurt me."

"Well, then, neither am I afraid. How can a man catch cold, if a woman doesn't? Uncle Maxim says a man must never be afraid—not of cold, or hunger, no, nor of thunder, or the heaviest storm-clouds."

"Uncle Maxim? Is that the one that walks with crutches? I've seen him. He's so horrible!"

"He is not horrible. He's just as kind as he can be."

"Ah, but he is," she insisted, with great conviction. "It's because you've never seen him, you can't tell."

"Who can tell, then, if I can't? He teaches me."

"And whips you?"

"Never. Nor scolds me, either. Never, never."

"That's good. Because, how can anybody hurt a blind boy? That would be a sin."

"Why, but he never hurts anyone at all," Petro returned; but he spoke a little absently. His sensitive ear had caught Iochim's approaching footsteps.

A moment later, the stableman's tall figure appeared on a low ridge that lay between the manor and the river, and his voice came ringing through the evening hush:

"Petro-o-o!"

"You're being called," the little girl said, getting up.

"I know. But I don't feel like going home."

"Ah, but you must. I'll come and visit you tomorrow. Your people will be expecting you now. And I must go home, too."

VII

The little girl kept her promise faithfully, earlier even than Petro could have hoped. Working at his lessons with Maxim, next morning, he suddenly lifted his head, sat listening a moment, and then asked excitedly,

"May I run out a minute? That little girl has come."

"What little girl?" Maxim demanded amazedly.

He followed Petro towards the door.

True enough, the little girl of the day before was just turning in at the manor gate. Anna Mikhailovna happened to be passing through the yard at the moment, and the little visitor went straight up to her, with no sign of embarrassment.

"What is it, dear child?" Anna Mikhailovna asked, thinking the little girl had been sent to her on some errand.

But the tiny woman held out her hand, with great dignity, and asked,

"Is it you has a blind little boy?"

"Why, yes, my dear, I have," Anna Mikhailovna answered, very much taken by her visitor's clear blue gaze and fearless manner.

"There, then. You see, Mother's allowed me to visit him. May I see him, please?"

But at this moment Petro himself came running up, and Maxim appeared on the porch.

"It's that same little girl, Mother! The one I told you about," Petro cried, when he had greeted his visitor. "Only—I'm having a lesson just now."

"Oh, I think Uncle Maxim will excuse you, just this once," the mother said. "I'll ask him, shall I?"

But the little woman, evidently quite at home, had already turned to meet Maxim, who was coming slowly across the yard towards them. Holding out her hand to him, she declared, with gracious approval,

"It's good of you not to whip a blind little boy like that. He told me."

"Not really, my dear young lady?" Maxim returned, with comic gallantry. "I'm greatly obliged to my pupil, for winning me the favour of so delightful a creature."

And he burst into laughter, patting the tiny hand he held in his. The little girl stood looking up into his face; and her frank, clear gaze quickly won that woman-hating heart of his.

"Look at that, Anna," he said, turning to his sister, with an odd smile on his lips. "Our Petro's beginning to make friends of

his own. And you must agree that ... well, blind as he is, he's managed to make quite a good choice, hasn't he?"

"What are you hinting at, Max?" the young mother demanded sternly, her face aflame.

"Nothing. I was joking," he said quickly, realising that his careless quip had touched an aching spot, had brought into the open a secret worry over coming problems hidden deep in the mother's heart.

Anna Mikhailovna flushed redder still. Stooping, she threw her arms around the little girl, in sudden passionate tenderness. The child received her fierce embrace with that same clear gaze, only the least bit surprised.

VIII

This was the beginning of a close friendship between the two estates. The little girl, whose name was Evelina, spent some part of every day at the manor; and soon she, too, began to study with Uncle

Maxim. Her father, Pan Yaskulsky, was not too pleased at first by this idea. For one thing, he thought a woman quite sufficiently educated if she could keep her laundry lists and household accounts in order. For another, he was a good Catholic, and felt that Pan Maxim should not have gone to war against the Austrians, when "our father the Pope" had so clearly expressed himself against it. And, finally, it was his firm conviction that there was a God in heaven, and that Voltaire and all Voltaireans were doomed to boiling pitch—a fate which many thought to be awaiting Pan Maxim as well. On closer acquaintance, however, he had to admit that this wild brawler and heretic was a very pleasant man, and a very clever one; and he finally agreed to compromise.

Still, in the depths of his heart, he could not help a certain uneasiness. And so, bringing his daughter to the manor for her first lesson, he felt called upon to start her off in her studies with a solemn and somewhat pompous exhortation—intended, however, rather for Maxim than for the child.

"Now, then, Evelina," he began, laying his hand on his daughter's shoulder, but

glancing sidewise at her teacher, "you must always remember our God in heaven, and his holy Pope in Rome. It's I, Valentin Yaskulsky, tell you that, and you must put your faith in me, because I'm your father. Primo."

Pan Yaskulsky's glance at Maxim, at this point, was particularly significant. In resorting to Latin, it was his purpose to show that he, too, was no stranger to scholarship, and not easily to be deceived.

"Secundo," he continued, "I'm a nobleman, and over the stack and crow in our family's glorious coat of arms stands a holy cross in a blue field. The Yaskulskys have always been valorous knights, but many of them, too, have exchanged the sword for the missal, and they have never been ignorant of what concerns religion, so that there you must put your faith in me. Well, and so far as other things go, orbis terrarum, or all things earthly, give your attention to Pan Maxim Yatsenko, and be a good pupil to him."

"Never you fear, Pan Yaskulsky," Maxim assured the old man, smiling. "I don't recruit little girls to fight for Garibaldi."

IX

Both of the children benefited by studying together. Petro was ahead, of course; but this did not preclude a definite element of emulation. Again, Petro often helped Evelina with her lessons; and she, in turn, often found very effective ways of helping him to understand things that his blindness made difficult for him. And her very presence gave a new interest to his studies, a pleasant animation that tended to stimulate his mental effort.

In every way, this friendship was a gift of fortune. Petro no longer sought to be entirely alone. He had found such communion as his elders, for all their love, were incapable of giving him; had found a presence that brought him pleasure even in those moments of hushed spiritual tension that sometimes came upon him. The children were always together, now, in their excursions to Petro's high rock, or to the river-bank. When Petro took up his pipe, Evelina would sit listening in childish rapture. When he laid it aside, she would begin to talk, describing her vivid, child's impressions of all that lay around them.

She could not express what she saw, of course, in words that would all be clear to her blind companion. But her simple sketches, the very tone in which she spoke, helped him to grasp the essential, characteristic flavour of everything that she described. If she spoke of the darkness of night, of its damp, chill blackness, blanketing the earth, he would seem to hear this darkness in the hushed awe of her voice. If she turned her grave little face to the sky and cried, "Oh, what a cloud, over there! Such a huge, grey cloud, floating this way!"—he would seem to feel the cloud's cold breath, to hear, in her voice, the rumbling advance of this fearful monster that was crawling towards them across the far heights of the sky.

Chapter Four

I

There are souls which seem born for the quiet heroism of that love which goes hand in hand with care and grief; souls to which ministration to others in misfortune seems an organic necessity, the very breath of life. Nature has endowed them, these souls, with the tranquillity, lacking which such everyday, prosaic heroism would be inconceivable; has providently softened their passions, their ambitions, aspirations, subordinating all purely selfish hopes and desires to this one dominant trait of character. Such people often seem to those around them cold, unemotional, sober beyond all need. Deaf to the impassioned appeal of earthly life, they follow the sad path of duty tranquilly as they might the road of the most glorious personal happiness. Cold as snow-topped mountain peaks, they seem; and majestic,

too, as those lofty peaks. All that is worldly and base lies like dirt at their feet. Even slander and gossip slip from their snow-white robes, as splattered mud from the wings of a swan.

This is a type only rarely created by life or training. Like talent, like genius, it is Nature's endowment to a chosen few. Its traits are early manifested, and they were already evident in Petro's little friend. The mother soon realised what a happy thing this childish friendship might become for her blind boy. And Maxim, seeing this as well as she, felt that now, when the child had everything he had been lacking, the course of his spiritual development should be smooth and even—unhindered, undisturbed.

But that was an error, and a bitter one.

II

For some years, while Petro was still quite small, Maxim thought himself entirely in control of the boy's spiritual growth. Not every aspect of this growth,

perhaps, arose from the tutor's direct influence; but he was sure, in any case, that no new development, no new spiritual acquirement, could escape his notice and his guiding hand. But when Petro grew older, and entered upon the period transitional between childhood and adolescence, these lofty pedagogical dreams turned out to be quite unfounded. Hardly a week passed that did not bring something new, and often startling; and Maxim was altogether at a loss to find the source of these new ideas and concepts that arose in the blind boy's mind. There was some unknown force at work in the very depths of the child's being, thrusting up to the surface the most unexpected manifestations of independent spiritual development. And Maxim could only bow his head in reverent awe before these mysterious processes that had begun to interfere in his methods of pedagogy. Nature seemed to know some stimulus, some way of revelation, to give the child new concepts that he could not possibly, in his blindness, have developed from direct experience. Contemplating all this, Maxim had a sense of the endless, unbroken continuity of life's vital processes—passing

ever on, in all their thousands of details, through the successive train of individual lives.

It frightened him, at first, this realisation that he was not entirely master of the child's mentality; that there was something else, independent of his will and unaffected by his influence, that worked upon his pupil. It made him fear for the child's future, fear the possibility of desires and seekings that might bring the blind boy nothing more than unappeasable longings and suffering. And he began to grope for the sources of these new springs of knowledge—hoping to stop them up, for the boy's own good.

The mother, too, noticed these sudden strange flashes. There was a morning when Petro came running up to her, excited as she had seldom seen him.

"Mother, Mother," he cried. "I saw a dream!"

"What did you see, then, child?" the mother asked, with a sad doubt that she could not suppress.

"I saw ... you, in my dream, and Uncle Maxim. And ... and—everything, I saw. It was so fine, Mother! Oh, it was so fine!"

"Well, and what else did you see, Petro?"

"I can't remember."

"Do you remember me?"

"No," the child answered hesitantly. "No, I can't remember. Not anything."

There was a moment's silence.

"But I did see, just the same, I did see, truly," he cried.

His face clouded over, and a tear gleamed in his sightless eyes.

This happened several times. And with each repetition the boy grew sadder, more unquiet.

III

Passing through the yard, one day, Maxim heard strange sounds floating from the drawing-room, where Petro should have been having a music lesson. A strange sort of exercise, this! It consisted of only two notes. First, the very highest, brightest note of the upper register, quivering as it was struck—repeatedly, rapidly, over and over again; then,

suddenly—and also over and over—a low, rolling bass note. What could such extraordinary music mean? Maxim turned quickly towards the house, and a moment later, opening the drawing-room door, stopped short in amazement at the scene confronting him.

Petro, in his tenth year now, sat on a low stool at his mother's feet. Beside him, its neck outstretched and its long beak turning restlessly from side to side, stood a young stork Iochim had tamed and given to the boy. Petro always fed his pet from his own hand, and the bird followed him everywhere. Now he was holding it still with one hand, and with the other gently stroking its feathers—the neck, the back, the wings. His face was set in strained attention. And his mother, at the piano—her face aflame with excitement, her eyes dark with grief—was striking one of the keys, rapidly, repeatedly, evoking that continuous, quivering highest note of all. As she played, she looked with painful intentness into the child's face at her knee. And then, when the boy's hand, stroking the stork, reached the point at the end of the wing where the intense white of the feathers ended abruptly in as intense a

black, the mother's hand swept down across the keyboard and a low, bass note came rumbling through the room.

They were so absorbed in what they were doing that neither of them noticed Maxim until, recovering from his amazement, he interrupted them with a loud, "Anna! What does all this mean?"

Meeting her brother's searching glance, Anna Mikhailovna hung her head like a little girl whom her teacher has caught at some childish mischief.

"Well, you see," she explained awkwardly, "Petro says he feels some difference in the colouring of the feathers. Only he can't understand just what the difference is. He spoke of it himself, truly he did, and I think he really feels it."

"And if he does, what then?"

"Why, nothing, only ... you see ... I thought perhaps I could help him a little to understand the difference, by using this difference of sounds. Don't be cross with me, Max. I really think it's very similar."

Maxim was so amazed by this new thought that, at first, he could find nothing to say. He made her repeat her experiment, and watched the boy's strained face in silence, shaking his head. -

"Do try to understand me, Anna," he told his sister, when the boy had left the room. "It's not a good thing to raise questions in the child's mind that you can never, never answer to his full satisfaction."

"But he brought it up himself, truly he did," she cried. "That makes no difference. The boy has no choice but to settle down to his blindness. And we must try to make him forget any such thing as light. I do my best to prevent any outer stimulus that might lead him to fruitless questioning. And if we could rid him of all such stimuli, he'd never feel the lack in his sensations—just as we, with all five senses, never long for some unknown sixth."

"Ah, but we do," she answered softly.

"Anna!"

"We do," she persisted. "We often long for what's impossible."

Still, she yielded to her brother's counsel.

But this time Maxim was wrong. In his eagerness to block all outer stimuli, he had failed to take into account those impulses which Nature had implanted in the child's own being.

IV

The eyes, someone has said, are the mirror of the soul.

It would be more true, perhaps, to liken them to windows, through which the soul receives its impressions of the outer world in all its vivid, sparkling colour. Who can say what portion of our spiritual make-up depends upon our sight impressions?

A man is only one link in an unending chain of lives that stretches, through him, from the bottomless past to the infinitely distant future. In one such link, a blind little boy, some cruel chance had shut these windows. All his life must pass in darkness. But did that mean that the chords by which the soul responds to sight impressions had snapped within him, never to be mended? No! Through this dark life, too, the soul's receptiveness to light must continue, to be passed on to succeeding generations. The blind boy's soul was a normal human soul, with all the normal human capacities. And since every capacity carries with it the desire for accomplishment, this dark soul held within it an unconquerable longing for light.

Somewhere in the unfathomed depths lay inherited powers, unessayed, still dormant in the misty state of "potentiality", but ready at the first ray of light to rise in swift response. But the windows remained shut. The child's fate was sealed. He would never see that ray! All his life must pass in darkness.

And the darkness was alive with phantoms.

Had the child lived in poverty, had he been surrounded with misery, his thoughts might, perhaps, have been absorbed by these outer sources of suffering. But his family had taken care to isolate him from all that might cause him distress. They had given him unbroken peace and quiet. And now, in this quiet that reigned in his soul, the inner want made itself the more strongly felt. Through the still darkness around him, he began to feel a vague, but unremitting sense of a need that sought fulfilment—a striving to give shape to powers that lay dormant, unapplied, deep in his being.

All this gave rise to strange, undefined expectations and impulses—something in the nature of the will to fly that all of us have experienced in childhood, with the

wonderful dreams it is bound up with at that age.

And this, in its turn, gave rise to instinctive mental strivings that found expression in a look of painful inquiry on the blind boy's face. The "potentialities" of sight impression, inherited but not applied, raised strange phantoms in the childish brain—dark, shapeless, undefined, compelling, tormenting effort to attain he knew not what.

It was Nature, rising in blind protest against this individual "exception"—seeking to reassert the universal rule that here was violated.

V

And so, try as he might to eliminate all outer stimuli, Maxim would never be able to destroy the pressure from within, the pressure of a need unsatisfied At best, the care he exercised might succeed only in delaying the awakening of this need, in preventing the too early intensification of the blind child's suffering. For the rest, the

boy's unhappy fate must take its course, with all the bitter consequences of his blindness.

And it advanced upon him, his fate, a heavy storm cloud. His inborn liveliness subsided more and more, as the years passed by—like a receding tide; and an inner melancholy, vague as yet, but unremitting, sounded more and more strongly in his soul, and began to affect his character. The laughter that had rung out, in his early childhood, at every vivid new impression, now sounded less and less frequently. He was able to perceive but little of life's laughter, merriment, humour; but was wonderfully sensitive to the shadowy, wistful melancholy that sounded in Nature in his southern homeland, and in the songs of its people. His eyes would fill with tears at the song of how "the grave whispered with the wind, out in the open field", and he liked to go out into the fields himself, to listen to this whispering. More and more, he developed the desire to be alone; and when, his lessons over, he wandered away by himself, none of the household, if it could be helped, would break in on his seclusion. He would go off to some ancient burial mound, out in the

steppe, or to his hillock by the river-bank, or to that high rock he knew so well, and lie there listening, with not a sound about him but the rustle of leaves and the whispering of the grass, and, perhaps, the faint sighing of the wind over the steppe. These things harmonised in some very special way with the depths of his soul's mood. To the extent that he was capable of apprehending Nature, it was out here that he understood her best—completely, to the very bottom. Here, Nature did not worry him with insoluble problems. Here, there was this wind pouring itself straight into his soul, and the grass, that seemed to whisper soft words of sympathy; and when his young soul, tuned to the gentle harmony around him, relaxed in Nature's caressing warmth, he would feel something rising in his breast, something that flooded his whole being. He would bury his face, at such moments, in the cool, damp grass, and let the soft tears flow; soft tears, not bitter. Or, sometimes, he would take up his pipe, and forget all the world in wistful melodies congenial to his mood and to the quiet harmony of the steppe.

Any human sound that might break suddenly in upon this mood affected him, always, as a jarring dissonance. And that was natural enough. It is only with the closest, the most kindred of hearts that there can be communion at such moments; and the boy had only one such friend of his own age—the fair-haired little girl from the possessor's estate.

Their friendship grew steadily stronger. It was a completely reciprocal relationship. Evelina brought her friend her tranquillity, her quiet joy in life. She helped him, in his blindness, to perceive new shadings in the life around them. And he—he brought her his sorrow. It was as though her first knowledge of his grief had dealt the little woman's tender heart a deep and cruel wound, and—remove the dagger from the wound that it had dealt, and she would bleed to death. After the poignant sympathy that had hurt her so on that day of their first talk together, on the hillock by the riverside, his company grew daily more essential to her. When they were apart, the wound would begin to bleed, and the pain would fill her heart again; and she would hasten to her friend,

to ease her own suffering in unceasing care for him.

VI

On a mild autumn evening both families had gathered on the grassy stretch before the house, talking of one thing and another, and looking up often into the deep blue of the sky, with its glittering sprinkling of stars. The blind boy sat by his mother, as always, with Evelina close by his side.

For a moment, the talk died away. The evening was very quiet. Only the leaves, now and again, would flutter suddenly, and whisper something, and fall still.

And in this moment of silence a brilliant star dropped from somewhere in the dark-blue heights and swept in a flashing curve across the sky, leaving behind it a phosphorescent trace that lingered, only gradually fading, long after the star had disappeared. The little company watched it silently. Anna Mikhailovna, whose hand lay

on Petro's arm, felt him suddenly start, and shiver.

"What ... was that?" he asked, turning to her excitedly.

"A star falling, son."

"A star? Of course. I knew it must be a star."

"How could you know that, Petro?"

A sad note of doubt sounded in the mother's voice.

"Ah, but it's true, what he says," put in Evelina. "He knows lots of things ... well, somehow."

"This sensitivity to the outer world, increasing with every passing day, indicated a rapid approach to the critical age that lies between adolescence and youth. As yet, however, Petro's development was quiet enough. It might have seemed, even, that he had resigned himself to his fate; and the strangely even melancholy, never lifting, yet never greatly deepening, that had become habitual to him, now seemed somewhat less. But this was only a temporary lull: one of those breathing spaces that Nature gives us, as though of deliberate purpose—that the young life may muster up its strength, and gird itself to meet new storm and stress.

During such lulls new problems accumulate, unnoticed, and gradually mature. One touch—and the soul's tranquillity is thrown into confusion, to its very depths, like the sea before the onslaught of a sudden storm.

Chapter Five

I

A few more years passed by.

Nothing had changed at the quiet manor. The beeches still rustled in the garden; only their foliage seemed rather thicker now, and darker. The white house wore the same pleasant, welcoming look as always; only its walls had settled a little, and seemed the least bit out of line. The thatched eaves of the stable frowned down as they always had, and Iochim, still confirmed in his bachelor life, tended the horses as before. The pipe, too, still sounded from the stable doors in the evening hours; only now Iochim preferred to listen, while the blind boy played—be it pipe or piano.

There was more grey than before in Maxim's hair.

No more children had been born to the Popelskys, and the blind firstling

remained, as ever, the hub around which all the life of the manor centred. For him, the manor had shut itself up in its own narrow circle, content to live a quiet, secluded life, linked only with the no less quiet life of the possessor's little home. Thus, the boy—now a youth—had grown up much like a hot-house plant, sheltered against any harsh influence that might emanate from distant outer spheres.

He lived, as always, at the centre of a vast world of darkness: darkness above him, darkness around him—everywhere darkness, without end or limit; and, through the darkness, his sensitive nature strained to meet each new impression—like a taut string strains, ready to respond to sound in eager sound. And this taut expectancy noticeably affected his mood. Another moment—just another moment, it kept seeming, and the darkness would reach out its unseen hands and touch some chord within him, a chord still sunk in long and wearisome sleep and waiting, longing to be awakened.

But the familiar darkness of the manor, so kindly and so uneventful, brought to his waiting senses only the caressing murmur of the trees in the old garden, soothing,

lulling his mind. Of the distant world, he knew only through songs, and books, and history. It was only by hearsay, here amidst the pensive murmuring of the garden and the quiet peace of the manor, that he learned anything of the storms and passions of that far-off life—picturing what he heard through a mist of enchantment, as he might a song, an epic, a tale of wonder.

All went so well, it might have seemed. The mother, watching, saw that her son's spirit, sheltered as by a high wall, lay plunged in an enchanted semi-slumber—artificial, it might be, but at any rate tranquil. And she did not want this tranquillity to be shattered. She was afraid of anything that might shatter it.

Evelina, too, had grown up, by imperceptible degrees. Her clear eyes, looking out over this enchanted hush, at times held something of perplexity, of inquiry about what life might hold in store; but never did they reveal the slightest hint of impatience.

Pan Popelsky, in these years, had made his estate into a model property; but the question of his blind son's future was not, of course, any affair of this kindly soul's.

All that got taken care of, somehow, with no effort on his part.

Only Maxim, constituted as he was, found this hush a difficult thing to bear, even as the temporary state he knew it to be—a compelled phase in his plans for his pupil. The youthful spirit, he reasoned, must be given time to settle itself, to accumulate strength, that it might be able to withstand the harsh contact of life.

But without the magic circle, all this time, life was boiling, surging, seething. And the time came when the blind boy's old preceptor felt that he might, at last, break open this circle, throw wide the hot-house door, and let in a stream of the fresh outer air.

II

For a beginning, he brought to the manor an old friend who lived on an estate some seventy versts away. Maxim had visited this friend, old Stavruchenko, from time to time; and now, learning that he had some young people staying with him, wrote to invite them all to the manor. The invitation was accepted gladly—on the old man's part, because of the years of friendship that bound him to Maxim, on the part of the young people, because of the glamour and the traditions that still clung to the name of Maxim Yatsenko. Of these young people, two were Stavruchenko's sons: the younger a Kiev University student, specialising—as the fad was in those days—in philology; the elder a musician, studying at the Conservatory in St. Petersburg. The third was a young cadet, the son of a neighbouring landowner.

Stavruchenko was a hale old man, though his head was entirely grey. He wore his moustache long and drooping, Cossack-fashion, and carried his pipe and

tobacco-pouch tied to the sash that supported his vast Cossack pantaloons; spoke no language but Ukrainian; and, when he stood between his two sons, in their long white Ukrainian coats and embroidered Ukrainian shirts, had very much the look of Gogol's Taras Bulba. There was nothing in his character, however, of Bulba's romanticism. Stavruchenko was a landowner, and a very competent and practical-minded one. He had managed very well, all his life, under the feudal relationships that went with serfdom; and had now adapted himself equally well to the new relationships arising after the emancipation. He knew the peasantry as country landowners know them: he knew every husbandman in the village he owned, every cow in those husbandmen's barns, and—almost—every ruble in their purses.

But—though he never fought them with his fists—there was much of Bulba in old Stavruchenko's relations with his sons. They were constantly clashing, and clashing furiously, regardless of time and place. Wherever they might be, and in whatever company, the slightest word was liable to set off these unending debates.

Oftener than not it was the old man who began it, by mocking at his sons as "idealistic lordlings".

The young people would flare up, and the old man's spirit, too, would rise; and the result would be the most desperate hubbub, in the course of which each side would hear no few uncomplimentary opinions.

All this was a reflection of the well-known variance of "fathers and sons", though in a far milder form than the expression generally implies. The young people of that day, away at school from childhood, saw the countryside only in their brief holiday periods, and therefore lacked such practical knowledge of the peasantry as distinguished their fathers, who lived year in, year out on their estates. When the tide of "love for the people" arose in our society—the young Stavruchenkos were at that time in their last years at secondary school—they, too, had begun to "study the people". But they had begun this study from the pages of books. Somewhat later, they had advanced to a second stage—direct observation of "the people's spirit", as manifested in folk art. "Going among the people"— dressed

for the part, of course, in romantic Ukrainian coats and embroidered shirts—was at that period a very widespread tendency among the youth of the propertied classes in the South-West Territory. It was not the economic aspects of the people's life, to any great degree, that interested these young people. Going about the villages, they occupied themselves with recording the words and music of folk songs, noting down legends and superstitions, comparing written history with its reflection in folk tales about the past—in a word, "seeing" the peasantry through the poetic prism of romantic nationalism. This last, indeed, was a weakness to which the elder generation, too, was prone enough. But, for all that, the old folk and the young never seemed able to agree.

"Just you listen!" old Stavruchenko might say to Maxim, with a sly prod of the elbow in his ribs, when the student son was declaiming—his face flushed, his eyes ablaze. "The young son of a cur—he talks just like a book! A man might think he'd a head on his shoulders, really! Only—come, tell us, my fine scholar, how that Nechipor of mine got around you!"

The old man would twitch his moustache and shout with laughter, telling the story of his son and Nechipor with true Ukrainian humour. The young men would flush, but they were never at a loss for a reply.

They might not know this or that individual Nechipor or Fedko, of this or that particular village, they might say; but what they were studying was the entire people, in general and on the whole. They approached life from the loftiest viewpoint—the only one that permitted conclusions to be drawn, and broad generalisation achieved. They embraced vast perspectives at one glance, whereas certain of their practical-minded elders—confirmed inveterately in the age-old routine—failed to see the forest for the trees that blocked their view.

The old man was not displeased to hear his sons argue so learnedly.

"You can tell they've been to school," he would say, looking proudly about him—and then, turning back to his sons, "Say what you please, but that Fedko of mine can lead you anywhere he likes, like a pair of young calves—so he can! Whereas I can take that same rogue of a Fedko and stuff

him in my tobacco-pouch, and down my pocket too. And that only goes to show you're just a pair of pups compared to an old dog like me."

III

One of these debates had just died down. The elder folk had gone indoors, and through the open windows Stavruchenko's voice could be heard, describing a series of comic incidents that kept his listeners laughing merrily.

The young folk remained where they were, out in the garden. The student had spread his coat out on the grass and thrown himself down on it, with somewhat deliberate carelessness. His elder brother, the musician, sat beside Evelina, on the earth bank running around the house; and the cadet, buttoned up to the chin, sat next to him. Pyotr, too, sat on this seat, a little apart from the others, leaning against a window-sill. Pyotr's head was bowed. He was thinking about the debate he had just heard, which had interested him deeply.

"What did you think, Panna Evelina, of all that talk?" the elder of the brothers asked. "You never said a word, all through it."

"Why, it was all very fine—all you said to your father, I mean. Only..."

"Only what?"

Evelina did not at once answer. She laid her work down on her knees, smoothed it out carefully, and sat looking at it thoughtfully. It would have been difficult to say what she was thinking about: whether she should not have chosen a different canvas for the design she was embroidering, or—what answer to make to the question she had been asked.

All the young people were impatient to hear this answer. The student raised himself on his elbow and turned his face up to hers in lively curiosity. The musician sat watching her with calm, questioning eyes. Pyotr, too, tensed and lifted his head—then, after a moment, turned his face away.

"Only," Evelina continued, very low, still smoothing her embroidery on her knees, "it's not for every one to follow the same road in life. We have each our own destiny."

"Good Lord," the student exclaimed sharply, "what sober wisdom! Why, how old are you, Panna Evelina, if one may ask?"

"Seventeen," she answered simply—but immediately added, with naive, triumphant curiosity, "You thought I was much older, didn't you?"

The young men laughed.

"If I were asked your age," the musician said, "I'd be hard put to it to choose between thirteen and twenty-three. You seem a very child, at moments—truly! Yet you reason, at times, like a wise old lady."

"In serious matters one must reason seriously, Gavrilo Petrovich," the little woman declared mentorially; and she took up her embroidery.

A silence fell. Evelina's needle began to ply again. The visitors turned looks of curious interest on this tiny, yet so sober-minded young lady.

IV

Evelina had grown up, of course, since her first meeting with Pyotr; but young Stavruchenko's remark was very true. Her slender figure, at first glance, made her seem hardly more than a child. There was something, however, in her unhurried, even movements that gave her at times the dignity of a grown woman. Her face, too, made a similar impression. It is only among Slavs, I believe, that such faces are encountered. Fine, regular features, outlined in smooth, cool curves; blue eyes, calm and steady; pale cheeks, to which the colour rarely rose—not the pallor, this, that is ready always to blaze in the flush of passion, but, rather, the cool white of snow. Her straight, fair hair, lightly shadowing her marble temples, was confined in a heavy braid that seemed to draw her head back when she walked.

Pyotr, too, had grown and greatly matured. Anyone glancing at him just now, where he sat—pale and deeply moved—a little apart from the other young people, must have been strongly impressed by his handsome face, so unlike other faces in its expression, so sharply changing in response to every movement of the soul. His black hair lay in a graceful wave over

his prominent forehead, already lightly furrowed. His cheeks now flushed with rapid colour, now, as rapidly, blanched to a dull pallor. A nervous tremor passed, at times, over his lower lip, turned down the least bit at its corners; and his mobile eyebrows were seldom still. But his beautiful eyes stared out in an even, unmoving gaze that gave his face a somewhat unusual tinge of gloom.

"And so," the student began, after some moments of silence, "Panna Evelina feels that these things we've been talking of are beyond the powers of a woman's mind; that woman's lot lies in the narrow sphere of kitchen and nursery."

There was a certain self-satisfaction in the young man's tone (for these ideas were brand new at the time), and a challenging note of irony. Again, for a moment, silence fell. Evelina flushed nervously.

"You're a little hasty in your conclusions," she returned finally. "I understood your talk well enough—which shows that it's quite within the powers of a woman's mind. What I said about destiny referred only to my own, personal life."

She fell silent, and bent over her work with such an air of preoccupation that the young man's courage began to fail him.

"How strangely you talk," he said perplexedly. "A person might think you'd planned your whole life out ahead, to the very grave."

"But what is there strange about that?" Evelina returned quietly. "Why, I'm sure even Ilya Ivanovich"— that was the cadet —"has his life all planned out already; and he's younger than me, isn't he?"

"That's perfectly true," the cadet put in, pleased to be drawn into the talk. "You know, I read a biography of N—, not long ago. He lived by plan, too. Married at twenty, and got his command at thirty-five."

The student laughed mockingly. Again, a slight flush rose to Evelina's cheeks.

"There it is," she said, after a pause, with cold asperity. "We have each our own destiny."

No one tried to debate the point any further. A grave hush fell over the little group of young people—a hush through which it was easy to sense a feeling of puzzled alarm. They all realised that, unwittingly, their talk must have touched

some very delicate personal feeling; that Evelina's simple words veiled the quivering of a taut and sensitive chord.

No sound broke the hush but the rustling of the trees. It was growing dark, and the old garden seemed, somehow, out of humour.

V

All this talk and argument, this surging tide of youthful hopes and interests, opinions and expectations, swept down upon the blind youth like a sudden storm. At first he listened eagerly, his face aglow with wondering admiration. But, before long, he could not help noticing that this vigorous tide made no effort to sweep him along in its advance; that it evinced no interest in him whatever. No questions were ever put him, no opinion asked of him. He was left apart, in a cheerless sort of isolation—the more cheerless, the greater the animation now reigning at the manor.

But he still listened attentively to the talk, so new and strange; and as he listened his eyebrows would draw sharply together, and his pale face assume an expression of straining interest. It was a gloomy interest, however, and the thoughts it aroused were heavy and bitter.

Mournfully, the mother watched her son. Evelina's eyes expressed her sympathy and alarm. Maxim alone seemed not to notice how his pupil was affected by the lively company. With the greatest cordiality, he urged the visitors to come again, and often; and undertook to look them up a wealth of interesting ethnographical material.

They left, promising to return. In parting, the young men pressed Pyotr's hand with friendly warmth. He returned their pressure impulsively, and when they drove off stood for a long time listening to the retreating rumble of wheels—then, quickly, turned away and disappeared into the garden.

With their departure, all grew still again at the manor. But it was a different stillness now, Pyotr felt: a strange, unusual stillness. In the very hush, he seemed to hear the admission that something had

happened here, something of vital importance. Along the quiet paths, where no sound greeted him but the rustle of beeches and lilac, he seemed to hear echoes of the recent talk. And, too he sometimes heard, through the open windows, some sort of debate going on in the drawing-room. His mother's voice would float out, full of pain and pleading, and Evelina's, tense with indignation—both directed, evidently, against Maxim; while Maxim seemed to answer their attacks firmly, if heatedly. When Pyotr came in sight, these discussions would break off at once.

It was with deliberate purpose that Maxim had so ruthlessly hacked this first breach in the wall which had so long enclosed his blind pupil's world. Now the first swift, turbulent wave had swept in at the breach; and its impact had jarred the boy's spiritual calm.

He felt cramped, now, within his enchanted circle. He was oppressed by the tranquil quiet of his home, by the lazy rustlings and murmurings of the old manor garden, by the monotony of the slumber in which his youthful spirit had been plunged. The darkness brought him new voices—

calling, enticing; it was alive with new concepts, only vaguely defined, that came crowding into his brain and filled it with a restless longing.

It called, it summoned, it awakened needs that had been slumbering within him. And even these first beckonings made their mark. His face grew paler; and a dull, vague ache gnawed at his heart.

The mother and Evelina quickly noticed these signs of his disquiet. We who have sight, seeing on others' faces the reflection of their thoughts and feelings, learn in time to mask our own emotions. But the blind are helpless in this respect. Pyotr's blanched face was as easily read as a diary forgotten, unlocked, in a drawing-room; and it betrayed a harrowing unrest.

They saw, too, that Maxim noticed all this as well as they—more, that it seemed to enter into some plan he was pursuing. They both thought this bitterly cruel. The mother would have shielded her son, if she could, with her own body. A hot-house, Maxim called it? Well, and what of that, so long as, in this hot-house, her child had been happy? Let his life continue always so —quiet, tranquil, unruffled.

Evelina was less outspoken, seeming to reserve much of her thoughts. But her attitude to Maxim had changed. She objected, now, to many of his proposals—at times, to the most trifling of details—with a sharpness he had never met in her before. Looking out searchingly at her from under his drawn brows, he would often encounter a wrathful glitter in her eyes. He would shake his head at such moments, muttering something unintelligible, and surround himself with even thicker clouds of tobacco-smoke than always—a sign of concentrated mental effort. But he maintained his ground unyieldingly; and, from time to time, delivered himself of scathing remarks, addressed to no one in particular, concerning the foolishness of feminine love and the limitations of feminine reasoning—a woman's brain, as all the world knows, being too short-sighted to see beyond the moment's suffering or the moment's joy. It was not tranquillity that he sought for Pyotr, but the utmost attainable fullness of life. Every teacher, it is said, strives to mould his pupil in his own likeness. And Maxim sought for his nephew that which he himself had experienced and so early

lost: a life of struggle, of stirring conflict. In what form, he could not yet himself have said; but he made every effort to broaden the blind boy's impressions of the outer world—at the risk, even, of possible shocks and spiritual upheaval. It was something very different from this, he knew, that his sister and Evelina were seeking.

"Blind mother instinct!" he would exclaim at times, stumping up and down the room with an angry tapping of his crutches.

But these moments of anger were rare. Ordinarily he met his sister's arguments with mild persuasion and gentle sympathy, the more so that, when Evelina was not there to back her, she invariably yielded to his reasoning—which did not prevent her, be it added, from raising the question again before much time had passed. When Evelina was there, however, the resistance was far stronger, and at such times the old man sought refuge in silence. It was as though some contest were setting in between these two—a struggle in which each, as yet, was but studying his adversary, keeping his own cards carefully concealed.

VI

When, two weeks later, the visitors came again, Evelina's greeting was very cool. But their youthful animation held a charm she could not easily withstand. Day after day, the young people wandered about the village, or went shooting in the woods, or recorded the songs of the reapers, out in the fields. In the evenings they would gather in the garden, on the long seat running around the house.

And on one such evening, before Evelina realised what was happening, the talk turned again to painful topics. How it had come about, who had begun it, neither she nor any of the others could have said—just as they could not have said when it was that the sunset glow had died, and twilight gathered over the manor garden; or at what moment the nightingale had begun its song in the shadowed bushes.

The student threw into his words all the impassioned fervour of youth, advancing eagerly, without fear or calculation, to

meet the uncharted future; and there was a very compelling charm, the all-but-unconquerable force of settled conviction, in this faith with which he spoke of the future, of the wonders that it must bring.

The blood rushed to Evelina's cheeks. Today, she realised, this challenge was addressed—perhaps not altogether deliberately—to her, and her alone.

She bent low over her embroidery. Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks aflame. Her heart beat fast. But then the bright glow faded from her eyes, and the flush from her cheeks—though her heart beat faster still. Her lips were suddenly compressed, and a look of fright came into her blanched face.

Fright, because she had seemed to see a dark wall part before her eyes; and through the breach had gleamed bright, distant vistas of a different world—a broad world of seething life, activity.

Yes, it had long been calling her. She had not realised that before. Yet often and often had she sat alone for hours, on some secluded bench in the shady old garden, dreaming strange dreams—bright visions of far-off places; and in her visions there had been no room for blind Petro.

Now, this world was suddenly very near —not merely calling, but seeming to assert some sort of claim upon her.

She threw a swift glance at Pyotr; and her heart stabbed her. He sat very still, deep in thought, with a heaviness in his attitude that she was not soon to forget. He understood—yes, everything! And as this thought flashed through her mind, Evelina felt suddenly very cold. The blood rushed to her heart, leaving her face so white that she herself could feel its pallor. For just one instant she saw herself removed to that bright, distant world, while he sat here alone, his head bowed low. But no, not here. Out on the hillock by the river-bank—the blind little boy she had cried over, that evening long ago.

And she was frightened, frightened lest someone try to draw the dagger from her old wound.

Now she recalled Maxim's eyes, so often turned to her of late. So that was the meaning of those long, silent looks! Better than she herself, he had guessed her mood, had realised that her heart lay open still for struggle and for choice, that she was not yet confident.... But he was wrong! Yes, she knew what her first step must be;

and, that step taken, she would see what she might yet wring out of life.

She drew a deep, gasping breath, as after heavy physical exertion, and looked around her. She did not know how long they had been sitting thus, in silence—what more the student had said, if anything, or when he had broken off. She glanced at the place where Pyotr had been sitting.

He was not there.

VII

"You must excuse me, gentlemen," she said, quietly folding up her work. "I shall have to leave you, for a while, to your own resources."

And she walked slowly down the shadowed garden path.

It was not only to Evelina that these evening hours were so heavy with anxiety. Coming up to a bend in the path, she heard voices a little way ahead, where a bench stood under the trees. Maxim and Anna

Mikhailovna sat there, talking, and both seemed deeply moved.

"That's so. It was the girl I was thinking of, no less than the boy," Maxim said gruffly. "Just think of it yourself, a moment. Why, she's only a child. She knows nothing at all of life. Would you take advantage of her innocence? You couldn't do that, surely!"

The mother's voice, as she answered, was very near to tears.

"Well, but Max, what ... what if she....What will become of my poor boy?"

"Come what may," the old soldier returned firmly, though his voice was sad. "We'll do our best, if such a time should come. But in any case, he must never be weighed down by the thought of a life spoiled on account of him. Yes, and you and I, Anna—have we no conscience? You must think of that, too."

His voice had softened. Lifting his sister's hand, he kissed it tenderly. Anna Mikhailovna bowed her head.

"My poor, poor boy! It would have been better, then, if he'd never met her," she moaned, so softly that Evelina rather guessed her words than heard them.

The girl paused, flushing painfully. If she came past them now, they could not but realise that she had overheard their secret thoughts.

But then, proudly, she raised her head. She had not meant to eavesdrop, after all. And in any case, she was not to be halted in her chosen course by any feeling of false shame. And he took too much upon himself, besides—Uncle Maxim. Her life was her own, and she would do with it whatever she found fit.

And, her head held high, she walked on slowly down the path, past the bench where they were sitting. Maxim hurriedly pulled his crutch out of her way; and Anna Mikhailovna looked up at her with miserable eyes, full of love, almost adoration, and at the same time of fear—seeming to feel, in her mother's heart, that this fair, proud girl, walking past them with a look of such wrathful challenge, was the carrier of joy, or of grief, for her son's whole future.

VIII

Off at the end of the manor garden there was an old, abandoned water-mill. Its wheels had long ceased turning; its shafts were overgrown with moss; and the water filtered through its leaky sluices in several tiny streamlets, never still. This was a favourite haunt of the blind youth's. He often sat for hours on the dam, listening to the rippling murmur of the water—and then, at home, drew from the piano those same rippling sounds. But now he had no heart for the murmuring water. Now he strode up and down, up and down the path, his heart overflowing with bitterness, his face twisted with the pain that filled him.

Hearing Evelina's light footsteps, he stopped short. She came up to him, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Tell me, Pyotr," she said earnestly. "Tell me—what's the matter? What is it that troubles you so?"

He turned quickly and moved down the path again. Evelina kept close at his side. She understood his silence, his sharp turning away; and, for a moment, she hung her head.

Someone was singing, back at the house:

O'er the rocky peaks,
Hear the eagles' loud screams,
See them soaring, gliding, swooping,
Seeking out their prey....

A lusty young voice, softened by the distance, singing of love, and happiness, and the open spaces—it came floating through the evening hush, stilling the lazy whisperings of the garden.

They were happy, those young people, with their talk of such a full and vivid life. She, too, only a few minutes past, had been with them, intoxicated with the dream of that bright life, where there remained no room for him. She had not even noticed when he left—and who could say how long these moments of grief might have seemed to him, in his loneliness?

Of all this Evelina thought, walking down the path at Pyotr's side. Never before had it been so difficult for her to speak to him, to turn his mood. But now too, she could see, her very presence was gradually softening his gloom.

It was not long before his hurried step slowed down, and his face began to clear. With Evelina at his side, the bitter pain in his heart grew less, giving way to another, a softer feeling—a familiar feeling, that he could not have named, but to whose healing influence he yielded willingly.

"What is it?" Evelina asked again.

"Nothing in particular," he answered, with a bitter note in his voice. "It's simply that I feel so utterly unwanted and unneeded in this world."

The song at the house had died away. There was a silence, and then a new song reached them, barely audibly—one of the old Ukrainian dumkas, softly sung, in the manner of the ancient bandurists. At times the voice of the singer would fade entirely away, leaving a vague, unformed dream to reign in the listeners' souls; and then again the melody would reach them faintly, through the rustling of the trees.

Pyotr stopped, involuntarily, to listen.

"You know," he said wistfully, "it sometimes seems to me it's true, what old people like to say—that the world keeps getting worse and worse to live in. Even for the blind, the old times were better. I'd have played the bandura, if I'd lived then,

instead of the piano. And I'd have gone wandering about the country, through the towns and villages. The people would have thronged to hear me, and I'd have sung to them of their fathers' great deeds, of heroism and glory. I'd have had my place in life, blind as I am. Whereas now.... Why, even that child of a cadet, with the shrill little voice—even he has his path chalked out. Did you hear him? When he's to marry, and when he's to get his command. The others laughed at him. But for me—for me, even that's far out of reach."

Evelina's blue eyes opened wide in alarm, and a tear gleamed in the evening shadows.

"You've been listening to that young Stavruchenko," she returned, as lightly as she could, trying to hide her anxiety.

"Yes, I have," Pyotr said slowly. "He has a very pleasant voice. Is he good-looking?"

"He's nice," Evelina began thoughtfully —but broke off, in swift anger at herself, to declare sharply, "No, he isn't, not at all, and I don't like him one bit! He's too sure of himself, and his voice isn't pleasant, either. It's too loud."

Pyotr said nothing, taken aback by this sudden fit of anger.

"Such stupid foolishness!" Evelina hurried on, stamping her foot. "It's Maxim's doing, all of it, I know it is. Oh, how I hate him now, that old Maxim!"

"What are you saying, Evelina?" Pyotr cried. "What do you mean—his doing?"

"It is, it is, and I just hate him!" she repeated stubbornly. "He's planned and calculated till he's strangled any bit of human kindness he ever had in him. Don't you talk to me of them! Who ever gave them the right to interfere in other people's lives?"

Suddenly breaking off, she clenched her slender hands until the knuckles cracked, and began to cry, as children do.

Pyotr took her hands in his, with wondering concern. He could not understand this sudden outburst. Evelina had always been so quiet, so entirely the master of her emotions! He stood listening to her sobs, and to the strange echo that her sobbing aroused in his own heart. Old memories surged up—a memory of himself, out on his hillock, sad as he had been today, and of the little girl, weeping for him as now she wept again.

But all at once she pulled her hands free —and again he stood wondering, for she was laughing.

"Silly goose that I am! What was I crying about?"

She dried her eyes and went on, her voice soft with repentance.

"I mustn't be so unfair. They're really fine people, both of them. And the things he was talking of are very fine. Only, all that—it's not for everyone."

"It's for everyone who can undertake it," Pyotr said.

"Don't be ridiculous!" she returned briskly—though, mingling with her smile, her voice still carried traces of her recent tears. "Why, even if you take Maxim—he fought as long as he could; but now that he can't, he takes life as it comes. Well, and we too..."

"Don't say, we. For you, it's quite another matter." ' "No, it isn't." \ "Why isn't it?"

"Because... Well, then—because you're going to marry me, aren't you? And so our lives will be alike."

"Marry you? Me? You ... you mean, you'd marry me?"

"Why, of course I do," she cried, her tongue tripping over the words in her excited haste. "You silly boy! Hadn't you really ever thought of it? A simple thing like that? Why, who were you thinking of marrying, if not me?"

"Yes, of course," he agreed, with unaccustomed selfishness; but, suddenly realising what he was saying, continued quickly, taking her hand in his, "No, Evelina. You listen to me. You heard their talk, just now. In the cities, girls can study. They can learn. And you, too—great things might open up for you. Whereas I..."

"Well, and what of you?"

"I ... I'm blind," he concluded, quite illogically.

Again the memories of childhood rose in his heart: the river, lapping softly on its banks; his first acquaintance with Evelina, and her bitter tears when he told her of his blindness. And instinctively he broke off, realising that his words must wound her now, too, as they had wounded her then. There was no sound for a moment but the gentle rippling of the water in the sluices. Evelina was very still—so still, she might not have been there at all. In that moment, her face was twisted with silent pain. But

she quickly mastered herself, and when she spoke again her voice was light and carefree.

"And what if you are?" she demanded. "After all, if a girl falls in love with a blind boy, why, what can she do but marry that blind boy? That's how it always works out, you know. So that—what can we do about it?"

"If a girl falls in love," he repeated slowly; and his mobile eyebrows drew together in concentrated thought, as the familiar words sank into his consciousness in so new an aspect. "If she falls in love?"—this time on a rising note of excited query.

"Why, of course! You and I—we're both in love. You silly boy! Why, just think a minute: could you live on here alone, if I went away?"

His face paled, and his unseeing eyes opened wide.

It was very quiet. Only the water continued its rippling murmur. Even this would fade at times, almost dying away; but always it would rally, and carry on its tinkling tale. A soft whispering filled the dark foliage of the bird cherries. The singing at the house had stopped—but now

a nightingale trilled tentatively, on the bank of the mill pond.

"I'd die," he said dully.

Her lips trembled, as on that day of their first acquaintance.

"And so would I," she said, with an effort, in a voice that was suddenly faint and childlike. "And so would I—alone, so far away, without you."

He pressed her slender fingers. And, how strange—her gentle answering pressure was so unlike what it had always been before! Now, this slight movement of her fingers found its way deep, deep into his heart. And Evelina herself had become, not only his accustomed childhood friend, but also—at one and the same time—a new, a different person. He, Pyotr, now seemed to himself strong and virile; Evelina—weak, and in tears. In an impulse of the deepest tenderness, he drew her close and began to stroke her silky hair.

And it seemed to him that all the grief in his heart was stilled, that he had no more longings and desires, that there was nothing in life but this one moment.

The nightingale by the pond, satisfied at last with its tentative ventures, burst into full song, filling the quiet garden with

passionate music. Evelina started, and shyly put aside Pyotr's caressing hand.

He released her at once, and stood listening as she smoothed back her hair. His breath came full and free. His heart beat loud, but evenly—driving through his body, with the hot rush of blood, a new sense of concentrated energy. When, a moment later, she said simply, "Now we must get back to our guests," he listened wonderingly, hearing not so much the words as the new notes in this dear voice he knew so well.

IX

They had all gathered in the little drawing-room. Only Pyotr and Evelina were missing. Maxim sat talking with old Stavruchenko, but the young people, lounging by the open windows, were very quiet. A strange, hushed mood reigned in the room—the mood that comes at moments of an emotional crisis that is sensed by all, if not by all entirely understood. The absence of Pyotr and

Evelina seemed, somehow, very marked. Maxim kept breaking off his talk to glance swiftly, expectantly at the open doors. Anna Mikhailovna had a sad, almost a conscience-stricken look. She was making an obvious effort to behave as a cordial and attentive hostess. Only Pan Popelsky, who was growing noticeably stouter as the years rolled by, was placid as always, half-dozing in his chair in expectation of his supper.

Footsteps sounded on the veranda, and all eyes turned that way. Evelina appeared in the black opening of the veranda door. Behind her, Pyotr was coming slowly up the steps.

Evelina felt the eyes turned so intently on her. But she showed no embarrassment. Her step was even as always as she came into the room. Only once, as she encountered Maxim's glance, did her lips curl in a faint smile, and her eyes flash a look of ironic challenge.

Anna Mikhailovna had eyes only for her son.

Pyotr, slowly following Evelina, seemed hardly to realise where he was. Coming into the bright light at the doorway, he paused suddenly, his pale face and slender

figure outlined against the night. But then he stepped over the threshold and—still with that strange, absent look on his face—walked quickly across the room to the piano.

Music was an accustomed element in the quiet life of the manor; but it had always been a very domestic element, a thing unshared with the outside world. During these days when the house resounded to the talk and songs of their young visitors, though the elder of the two young Stavruchenkos, a student of music, had played at times, Pyotr had never once approached the piano. And this reticence had been one of the things that kept him so much in the background in the lively company—effacing him so thoroughly, amidst the general animation, that his mother's heart had bled to see it. But now, for the first time, Pyotr moved confidently to his accustomed place. He did not seem, actually, to realise what he was doing; nor did he seem to notice the people in the room. True, such a hush had fallen over the company with his and Evelina's appearance that he might almost have thought the room was empty.

He opened the piano and laid his fingers gently on the keys, then played a few swift, light chords—tentative, inquiring. He seemed to be asking some question—asking the piano, as he pressed its keys; or, perhaps, asking his own heart and mood.

The chords died away, and he sat motionless, absorbed in thought—his hands spread, passive, on the keys; and the hush in the drawing-room grew deeper still.

The night looked in at the black rectangles of the open windows. Here and there a leafy tree, caught out of the darkness by the light from the house, seemed to be looking curiously into the room. Impressed by Pyotr's vague prelude, and caught by the spell of a strange inspiration that seemed to radiate from his pale face, the visitors sat in silent expectation.

And still Pyotr's hands lay passive on the keys. He sat as though listening, his unseeing eyes upturned. A tumultuous tide of emotions had risen within him. Life—unknown, unexperienced—had caught him up, as the rising waves catch up a boat that has long been lying peacefully on the

dry seaside sand. His face expressed amazement and inquiry—yes, and something else, an unwonted, excited animation, that came and went in swift changes of light and shade. His blind eyes seemed deep and dark.

For a moment he seemed unable to single out, in the tumult of his emotions, that one above all others that he sought so eagerly. But then—though his look of amazement, of expectation, did not change—he started, raised his hands over the keyboard, and, caught up by a new wave of feeling, let himself be carried away in flowing, singing music.

X

Playing by score is a difficult thing for the blind. The score is raised: separate signs for each note, strung out in rows like the letters in a book. Between notes meant to be played together, exclamation points are set, to indicate their connection. Reading with his fingers, the blind player is compelled to memorise every passage—

to memorise it for each hand separately—before he can attempt to play it. This is a laborious and lengthy process. But Pyotr had always loved the elements of which music is made; and when, after memorising a few bars for each hand, he sat down to play them, and the raised hieroglyphs of the book were transformed suddenly into harmonious sound—his pleasure and interest, at such moments, were so lively that the dry work by which they were attained lost much of its tedium, and actually began to fascinate him.

Still, there were too many intermediate processes between the raised characters in the book and their expression in sound. Each character, to become music, had to travel through the fingers to the brain, there to be established in memory, and then to travel back again from the brain to the finger-tips, as they pressed the keys. And Pyotr's musical imagination, highly developed from childhood, would intervene in the process of memorisation; so that the music thus learned, whoever its author, was always perceptibly tinged, in the playing, by the blind player's own personality.

Pyotr's musical feeling was moulded in the shape in which melody had first reached his consciousness, the shape in which, later, it had filled his mother's playing. It was his native folk music that sounded always in his soul; it was this music through which his spirit communed with Nature.

And from the first notes of the Italian piece he now began to play, with throbbing heart and overflowing soul, there was something so unusual about his interpretation that the visitors glanced at one another wonderingly. But as he played on an irresistible charm stole over them all, and only the elder of the two young Stavruchenkos, himself a musician, made any attempt to trace the familiar score, or to analyse its execution.

The music filled the room, resounded through the quiet garden. The young people listened with sparkling eyes, full of curiosity and excited interest. Old Stavruchenko sat quietly at first, his head bowed in thought; but soon he began to show a rising excitement.

"That's what you call playing—eh?" he whispered suddenly, jogging Maxim with his elbow. "What do you say to that?"

As the music gained in power, he was seized by memories—of his youth, most likely, for he threw back his shoulders, his cheeks flushed, and his eyes grew bright. He raised a clenched fist, as though to bring it down on the table with a crash; but restrained himself, and lowered it without a sound.

"Shelve the old man, will they? Let them try!" he whispered to Maxim, with a swift glance at his sons. "You and me, brother, in our day....Yes, and now too....Well, isn't that so?"

And he tugged at his long moustache.

Maxim, in general, was quite indifferent to music. Today, however, he sensed something entirely new in his pupil's playing; and he sat listening intently—shaking his head, from time to time, behind his sheltering cloud of tobacco-smoke, and turning his eyes now on Pyotr, now on Evelina. Again, life was interfering in his system, in a way he had not planned at all. Anna Mikhailovna, too, glanced often at Evelina, trying to determine what it was that sounded in Pyotr's music: grief, or joy.

Evelina sat in a corner where her face was sheltered from the lamplight. Only her

eyes, wide open, darker than by day, gleamed in the shadows. She had her own understanding of the music; for she heard in it the ripple of the water in the old mill sluices, and the murmur of the bird cherries in the shadowed garden.

XI

The melody had long since changed. Dropping the Italian piece he had been playing, Pyotr had given rein to his own fantasies—to all that had crowded his thoughts in those moments of silence when he sat, absorbed in memories, his hands lying passive on the piano keys. The voices of Nature filled his playing—the breath of the wind and the rustle of the forest, the plash of the river, and the vague murmurings that quiver and die in the distance; and, behind it all, that deep, heart-swelling emotion, so elusive of definition, that Nature's discourse arouses in the soul. Yearning, shall we call it? But why, then, should it be so pleasant?

Happiness, perhaps? Then why should it be so deeply, so infinitely sad?

At times the music grew stronger, louder; and, at these moments, a strange severity would come over the blind youth's features—as though he himself were amazed by the new power of his music, and looked forward impatiently to what more might follow. His listeners would wait in breathless expectation. A few more chords, it would seem, and all must merge into a beautiful and mighty harmony. But, hardly it had risen, the melody would sink again, in a strange, plaintive murmur—as a wave breaks in foam and spray; and for long moments afterwards the music would be threaded with bitter notes of query, of perplexity.

Then, perhaps, for a moment, the flying hands would be still, and a hush would fall once more over the room, broken only by the whisper of the trees out in the garden. The magic that had seized upon the little company, carrying them far, far away from the quiet manor, would be dispelled. The walls of the drawing-room would close in upon them, and the dark night peep in at the open windows—until again the

musician raised his hands over the keys and began to play.

And again the music would grow and strengthen, again it would seek and inquire, rising to ever loftier heights. Through an ever-changing clamour of chords, folk melodies would come pressing through—wistful tales of love, or memories of past days of suffering and glory, or the joyous revelry and hopes of youth—the blind player's attempt to find expression in familiar musical forms.

But the songs, too, would sink away, and again the plaintive notes of query, of a problem still unsolved, would quiver in the hush of the little drawing-room.

XII

A few last notes, imbued with undefined complaint. And as they died away Anna Mikhailovna, watching her son, saw in his face an expression that she well remembered. A sunny spring day rose in her memory; and again she saw tiny Petro lying in the grass by the river-bank, overwhelmed by the too vivid impressions of Nature's awakening.

But none of the others noticed this look of strain. The room rang with talk. Old Stavruchenko was shouting something at Maxim, and the young people, excited and moved, were pressing Pyotr's hands, predicting success and fame for him as a musician.

"No question about it," the elder of the brothers declared. "It's amazing, how you've grasped the very essence of our folk music, how completely you've mastered it. Only, what was that you played at the beginning?"

Pyotr named the piece, an Italian composition.

"So I thought," young Stavruchenko exclaimed. "I have some knowledge of it, but—your manner of playing is so strikingly individual! There are many who play better; but no one, surely, has ever played it as you did. It was— well, like a translation from the language of Italian music into that of Ukrainian. You need study, training, and then...."

Pyotr sat listening attentively. Never before had he been the focus of such eager talk; and it was giving rise to a sensation altogether new to him: a proud consciousness of his own power. Could it really be that this music of his—and it had cost him more pain, today, and left him more unsatisfied, than it ever had before—that this music of his could affect others so tremendously? Well, then—he too, it seemed, could do something in life!

And then, when the talk was at its loudest, he felt a sudden hot pressure on his fingers, which still lay on the keys. It was Evelina.

"Do you hear? Do you understand?" she whispered joyfully. "There's your work, then, waiting for you. If only you could see, if only you could know how you carried us all away!"

Pyotr started, and threw back his shoulders proudly.

Only the mother noticed Evelina's hurried whisper, and its effect on Pyotr. And, as she watched, she blushed—as though it were she who had just received the first caress of youthful love.

Pyotr did not move. He was struggling to master the new happiness that flooded his heart. And at the same time, it may be, he sensed the first shadow of the storm-cloud that was already rising, heavy, shapeless, somewhere in the utmost depths of his being.

Chapter Six

I

Pyotr woke early, next morning. Quiet filled his room. The house, too, was still. The stir that comes with day had not yet begun. From the garden, through the open window, the fresh breath of morning came pouring into him. Blind though he was, Pyotr had an excellent feeling for the state of Nature around him. He knew, now, that it was very early. He knew, too, that his window was open—knew it by the rustling of the trees, so close and clear, with nothing to bar it from the room. Today, this feeling was more vivid than ever. He knew, though it did not reach him, that the sun was peeping into the room; knew that, should he stretch a hand out through the window, the dew would come sprinkling from the bushes just outside. And there was another feeling too, today—a feeling

unfamiliar, never before experienced, but filling his whole being to overflowing.

He lay still awhile, listening to the twitter of some tiny bird out in the garden, and wondering at this strange new feeling in his heart.

What was it? What had happened?

And suddenly, as he questioned himself, came the memory of her words last night, in the dusk, by the old mill.

"Hadn't you really ever thought of it?" she had said, and—"You silly boy!"

No, he had never thought of it. Her presence had always been a joy to him; but, until that evening, it had been a joy not consciously recognised—as we are not conscious of the air we breathe. Those simple words had stirred his spirit like a stone cast into still waters: one touch, and the smooth, shining surface, reflecting the sunlight and the sky's distant blue, is gone —the water stirred to its very bottom.

Waking now, with his spirit thus renewed, he saw his old playmate in an altogether new light. All that had taken place the evening before came back, in its slightest detail; and, as her voice sounded in his memory, he was amazed at its new

tembre. "If a girl falls in love..." and—"You silly boy!"

He sprang out of bed, dressed hurriedly, and ran off down the dew-wet garden paths to the old mill. The water rippled in the sluices, and the bird cherries whispered around him, just as the night before; only then it had been dark, and now it was morning, bright and sunny. Never before had he "felt" the light so strongly—as though the damp fragrance, the freshness of the morning, carried with them to his tingling nerve centres some inkling of the joyous cheer of daylight.

II

Life at the manor became brighter, somehow, and happier. Anna Mikhailovna seemed young again; and Maxim could be heard to joke and laugh, though a moody rumbling still issued at times—like the echo of some distant storm—from his shelter of tobacco-smoke. Some people, he grumbled, seemed to think of life as something in the order of those stupid

novels that end with wedding bells; but there were plenty of things in this world of ours that it wouldn't harm such people to give a little thought to. And Pan Popelsky, rotund and handsome in healthy middle-age, his cheeks still ruddy, his hair gradually and evenly silvering—Pan Popelsky, evidently thinking that Maxim's grumbling was addressed to him, would invariably express his agreement and hurry off to attend to his affairs, which were always, it must be said, in perfect order. But the young people would only smile, absorbed in the plans that they were laying. Pyotr was to study music seriously, now.

When the crops were in, and autumn, decked in golden threads of gossamer, hung in languorous contentment over the fields, the whole family, with Evelina, set out on a visit to Stavrukovo, as the Stavruchenkos' estate was called. It was a journey of only some seventy versts; but this short distance brought a great change in the surrounding countryside. The last of the Carpathian foot-hills, still visible in Volhynia and along the Bug, were lost to view, and the landscape settled into rolling Ukrainian steppeland. The villages here

were green with orchards and gardens. Scattered gullies cut across the steppe; and here and there along the horizon stood tall grave mounds, long since ploughed around to the very base and now surrounded by yellow fields of stubble.

It was seldom that the family went so far from home. Away from the familiar fields and village, where he knew every inch of ground, Pyotr lost his confident ease of movement; he felt his blindness more strongly, and grew nervous and irritable. Yet he had readily accepted the Stavruchenkos' invitation. Since that memorable evening when he had first realised both his love and the power of his awakening talent, he seemed to shrink less from the outer world—from the dark, unknown vistas that he sensed beyond the bounds of his accustomed life. It had begun to attract him, this world, growing more upon him.

The days at Stavrukovo passed very pleasantly. Pyotr was far less constrained, now, in the youthful company. He would listen with eager interest to young Stavruchenko's masterful playing, and his stories of the Conservatory and of concerts hoard at the capital; and he would flush

with pleasure at the musician's enthusiastic praises when the conversation turned to Pyotr's own talent, so vividly expressed, if as yet unpolished. He no longer tried to efface himself, but joined in the general talk as freely as the others, though perhaps not so loquaciously. Evelina, too, had thrown aside the cold restraint—the vigilance, almost—that had hung over her so recently, and delighted them all by her carefree gaiety, her sudden fits of irrepressible merriment.

There was an old monastery, some ten versts from Stavrukovo, that was widely known hereabout for the part it had played, in its time, in local history. Again and again, Tatar hordes, like swarming locusts, had besieged its walls, sending their arrows in myriads against its defenders; or Polish troops had stormed it desperately; or, when it was held by the Poles, the Cossacks had rushed into battle to regain their fortress.

Now the ancient towers lay in ruin. The crumbling walls, patched here and there with stretches of peaceful paling, protected the monastery's vegetable gardens from no more dangerous foe than the enterprising cattle of the local

peasantry; and the broad moats were overgrown with millet.

One clear, mild autumn day the Stavruchenkos and their guests set out to visit this monastery. Maxim, with his sister and Evelina, went in the carriage—a broad, old-fashioned vehicle, swaying on its high springs like a wind-tossed boat. The young men rode.

Pyotr rode confidently along beside the others, guided always by the hoofbeats of his companions' mounts and by the sound of the carriage wheels on the road ahead. A stranger, seeing his easy, fearless manner, could hardly have guessed that this young horseman did not see the road—that he had simply learned by long practice to trust his horse's instinct. Anna Mikhailovna, at first, kept looking anxiously back at her son, uneasy because both horse and road were unfamiliar to him. Maxim, too, watched him furtively, with a mentor's pride in his pupil and a purely male superiority to women's silly fears.

"You know," the student exclaimed suddenly, riding up to the carriage, "I've just had an idea. There's a grave here that you really ought to see. We came on the

story not long ago, going through some old papers at the monastery, and it's tremendously interesting. We can go right now, if you like. It's not much out of our way—just at the end of the village."

"What makes you think of graves?" Evelina demanded, laughing. "Are we such sad company as all that?"

"I'll answer that question later," he returned, and called to the coachman to turn off towards Kolodnya and stop by the stile to Ostap's garden.

Then, turning his horse, he cantered back to join the other riders.

The carriage turned down a narrow little road, where its wheels sank deep into a thick layer of dust. The young men shot past, and dismounted by a wattle fence at the side of the road. When they had tied their horses here, the young Stavruchenkos walked back to help the ladies down from the carriage, when it should come up; and Pyotr stood waiting, leaning against the pommel of his saddle, his head inclined—listening intently, trying to orientate himself in this unfamiliar place.

To him, this bright autumn day was darkest night, enlivened only by the day-

time sounds around him. He could hear the approaching carriage, and the talk and laughter of the two young men. The horses at his side, reaching over the fence to the tall growth of weeds that bordered the vegetable garden inside, pulled at their bridles and made them tinkle. A song floated, wistful, lazy, on the light breeze. It came from somewhere quite near—among the garden beds, perhaps. There was a murmur of leaves, in some near-by orchard. A stork clattered its bill; there was a loud beating of wings, and a cock crowed, as though suddenly recalling some urgent matter; a well-sweep creaked. The sounds of workaday village life. And, indeed, the village was very near. They had stopped by a garden at its very edge.

Of more distant sounds, the clearest was the measured calling of a monastery bell, very thin and high. By the way the bell sounded, or perhaps by the feel of the breeze, or, it might be, by some other sign that he himself could not have named, Pyotr felt that there must be a sudden break or fall in the land somewhere beyond the monastery—the bluff bank of a stream, perhaps; and beyond it a long stretch of flatland, humming with the

sounds of peaceful life. Faintly, fragmentarily, these sounds too reached his ears, giving him an aural sensation of distance, veiled and quivering—as to us, who can see, distant outlines seem to quiver in the dim light of evening.

The breeze played with his hair, under the brim of his hat, and brushed past his ear with a soft murmuring much like the singing of an Aeolian harp. Vague memories stirred in his mind. Happenings of his distant childhood, caught up out of forgetfulness, came to life again in the form of wind, and touch, and sound. This breeze that played around him, mingling with the distant bell and with the wistful song here in the garden, seemed to be telling him some old, sad tale of the past history of these places, or, perhaps, of his own past, or of his future—so dark, so undefined.

But now the carriage had come up, and the whole company trooped over the stile into the garden. In a corner of the garden, among a rank growth of weeds and grasses, lay a broad stone slab, almost level with the earth around it. Green leaves of thistle, around flame-pink flower heads, broad-leafed burdock, and tall, thin-

stalked cockle swayed above the shorter grasses, rustling gently in the breeze, and Pyotr could hear them whispering over the neglected grave.

"It was only recently we discovered this," young Stavruchenko said. "Yet, do you know who lies under this stone? He was famous, in his day—old Ignat Kary."

"So this is where you lie, old fighter," Maxim said slowly. "How did he come to be here at Kolodnya?"

"It was back in 17—. The monastery was held by Polish troops, and the Cossacks had laid siege to it, together with some Tatar band. And—well, you know, the Tatars were always a dangerous sort of ally. The garrison must have found some way of buying over their mirza. And one night, when the Poles organised a sally, the Tatars joined them against the Cossacks. There was a fearful battle in the dark. The Tatars were beaten, I believe, and the monastery taken; but the Cossacks lost their leader in the fighting."

The young man paused a moment.

"There was another name in the story, too," he continued slowly, "though we haven't been able to find a second grave. The records at the monastery speak of a

blind young bandurist buried at Kary's side. He had been with Kary through many campaigns."

"Blind?" Anna Mikhailovna cried tremulously. "And campaigning with Kary?"

She had a vision of her own blind boy, in that fearful battle in the darkness.

"Yes, he was blind. And, evidently, famed for his singing throughout the Zaporozhye country. At any rate, that's how the record speaks of him, in that peculiar mixture of Polish and Ukrainian and Church Slavonic in which the story is set down. I can quote it for you, if you like. I remember this part of it almost word for word: 'And with him Yurko, gloried Cossack singer, who had never left his side, and was by him much loved. And Yurko too, when Kary lay dead, the heathen horde perfidiously cut down. For in their heathen faith know they no veneration for the crippled, nor for the glorious talent of song making and of the plucking of the strings, by which even the wolves of the steppe might be softened, yet not these heathen, who spared it not in their attack by night. And they are laid side by side, the singer and the warrior,

and may their noble end be gloried in eternity, Amen.'"

'The stone is wide," one of the company remarked. "Perhaps they lie together under it."

'That may be so. But the inscriptions are all worn away. The mace and horsetail still show, here at the top, but all the rest is gone. Nothing but lichen."

"Ah, but wait one minute," cried Pyotr, who had been listening to this tale with breathless interest.

He knelt beside the stone and pressed his slender fingers down on the green growth of lichen that covered it. Through the lichen, he could feel the firm texture of the stone, and the faint outlines of letters cut in its surface.

He sat thus a moment, his face uplifted, his eyebrows drawn. Then he read aloud.

'"Ignaty, known as Kary ... by the will of our Lord ... shot down from a Tatar bow....'"

"Yes, that much we made out," the student said.

Pyotr's fingers, tensely arched, crept further and further down the stone slab.

"'When Kary lay dead...'"

"'The heathen horde...'" the student put in eagerly. "That's how Yurko's death is described in the record. So that it's true—he lies here too, under this same stone."

"Yes—'the heathen horde'," Pyotr confirmed. "And that's all I can make out. No, wait a bit! Here's some more: 'Cut down by Tatar sabres....' And something else—but no, it's indecipherable. That's all."

All further memory of the young bandurist had been wiped out by erosion, in the century and a half that the stone had been lying over the grave.

For a moment, a deep silence hung over the garden. Only the foliage rustled in the breeze. Then the hush was broken by a long-drawn, reverential sigh. That was Ostap, the owner of the garden, and thereby master of the one-time ataman's last earthly abode. Coming up to welcome the gentlefolk, he had stopped in speechless amazement at the sight of the young man with upturned, sightless eyes, bending over the grave to read by touch words that years, and rain, and storm had combined to hide away from human sight.

"It's the grace of God," he said, his eyes fixed on Pyotr in a look of the deepest awe.

"It's the grace of God, that gives the blind to know what we, with eyes, can never see."

"Do you understand now, Panna Evelina, why I suddenly remembered Yurko?" the student asked, when the carriage had set off again along the dusty road on its slow progress towards the monastery. "We kept wondering, my brother and I, how a blind singer could have ridden with Kary and his flying bands. Of course, Kary may not have been the chief ataman at that time. He may have been simply a troop leader. But we know that he was always in command of mounted Cossacks, not of foot troops. And the bandurists—they were usually old men, wandering from village to village and singing for alms. It was only when I saw your Pyotr riding, today, that I suddenly pictured that blind lad in the saddle, with his bandura, slung on his back instead of a gun."

The young man paused a moment, then continued, almost enviously,

"And he fought in battles, too, it may well be. And in any case, he shared in all the marches and the dangers. Yes, what times there were, once, in this Ukraine of ours!"

"What dreadful times!" Anna Mikhailovna put in, sighing. "What wonderful times!" the young man returned. "Nothing like that ever happens now," Pyotr put in gruffly. He had just ridden up to join young Stavruchenko beside the carriage. For a moment he listened, his eyebrows raised, to catch the gait of the other horses. His face, rather paler than usual, betrayed a state of deep emotion.

"All that has disappeared, nowadays," he repeated.

"What was due to disappear, has disappeared," Maxim put in, with a hint of coldness in his tone. "Those people lived the life of their own time. It's for you to find the life that suits your time."

"It's all very well for you," the student said. "You've had something out of life."

"Yes, and life's had something out of me, too," the old Garibaldian returned, with a grim smile, glancing at his crutches.

There was a silence.

"I had my dreams of the old Cossack days too, when I was young," Maxim went on. "The wild poetry of it, and the freedom. I actually went off to Turkey, to join Sadik."

[Sadik-pasha—one Chaikovsky, a Ukrainian dreamer, who thought to make the Cossacks a political force in Turkey.]

"Well, and what came of that?" the young people demanded eagerly.

"I was cured of my dreams fast enough, when I saw those 'free Cossacks' of yours in the service of Turkish despotism. Pure masquerade, historical quackery! I realised then that history has swept all those old trappings into the waste heap; that it's the aim that matters, not the form, however handsome it may seem on the surface. And that was when I went to Italy. There, people were fighting for an aim I was willing to give my life for, even if I didn't know their language."

Maxim was serious now, and spoke with an earnestness that gave his words added weight. He had seldom taken any part in the loud debates between old Stavruchenko and his sons, except to chuckle quietly at their fervour, or to smile good-naturedly when the young people appealed to him as to an ally. But today he had been stirred by the old story that had risen so vividly before them as they bent over the moss-grown stone; and, too, he had the feeling that in some strange way this episode of the distant past had a real

significance in the present—for Pyotr, and, through Pyotr, for them all.

This time the young people made no attempt to argue—subdued, perhaps, by the emotion they had experienced in Ostap's garden a few minutes past, beside the gravestone that spoke so eloquently of the death of those past times; or, perhaps, impressed by the old veteran's earnest tone.

"What remains for us, then?" the student asked, breaking the silence that had fallen after Maxim's words.

"Struggle; the same eternal struggle," Maxim answered.

"In what field? In what forms?"

"That's for you to seek."

Now that he had dropped his usual half-mocking tone, Maxim seemed inclined to discuss things seriously. But no time remained, just now, for serious talk. The carriage was approaching the monastery gates. The student reached out a hand to check Pyotr's horse. Like an open book, the blind youth's face showed the deep emotion that still moved him.

III

Visitors to the monastery generally wandered awhile through the ancient church and then climbed to the belfry, which offered a broad view over the adjacent countryside. On clear days, by staring hard, one could make out the distant blobs of white that marked the gubernia centre, and, merging with the horizon, the gleaming curves of the Dnieper.

The sun had already begun to sink when, leaving Maxim to rest on a little porch by one of the monastic cells, the rest of the company made their way to the foot of the bell-tower. In the arched entrance-way they found a young novice waiting to take them up—a slender figure, in a cassock and a high, peaked hat. He stood with his back to the door, his hand on the padlock that secured it, facing a little group of children who hung about, alert as so many frightened sparrows, just out of his reach. Clearly, there had been some clash between the novice and these lively youngsters. Most probably, to judge by his belligerent attitude and the hand he still

kept on the lock, he had caught them hanging about the door, in the hope of slipping in when the gentlefolk went up, and had been trying to drive them away. An angry flush darkened his cheeks, contrasting sharply with the pallor of his skin.

There was something strange about the young novice's eyes. They did not seem to move at all. It was Anna Mikhailovna who first noticed this immobility of his gaze, and the peculiar expression of his face. Tremulously, she seized Evelina's hand.

The girl started.

"He's blind!" she whispered faintly.

"Hush," the mother answered. "And—do you notice?"

"Yes."

It was easy enough to notice—the novice's strange facial resemblance to Pyotr. The same nervous pallor, the same clear, but unmoving pupils, the same restless mobility of the eyebrows—starting at every sound, darting up and down as an insect's antennae will when it is frightened. The novice's features were coarser than Pyotr's, and his figure more angular; but that seemed only to emphasise the likeness. And when he

broke into a heavy cough, and his hands flew to his sunken chest, Anna Mikhailovna stared at him in wide-eyed panic, as at some ghostly apparition.

When his fit of coughing had passed, the novice unlocked the door, but stood before it, blocking the way.

"No youngsters around?" he demanded hoarsely—and, throwing himself suddenly forward, shouted at the children, "Be off, then, curse you!"

A moment later, as the young people were filing past him into the tower, his voice sounded in their ears with a sort of honeyed pleading:

"Will there be a little something for the bell-ringer? Watch your step—it's dark, inside."

All the company gathered at the foot of the stairs. Anna Mikhailovna had been hesitating, only a few minutes before, at the thought of the steep, difficult climb; but now she followed the others in dumb submission.

The blind bell-ringer shut and locked the door. It grew very dark inside the tower, and some time passed before Anna Mikhailovna noticed the dim beam of light overhead, coming in through a diagonal

slit in the thick stone wall. Cutting across the tower, the light cast a faint glow on the rough, dust-covered stones of the wall opposite.

The young people were already scrambling up the winding stairs, but Anna Mikhailovna, who had hung back to let them pass, still lingered irresolutely at the bottom.

Shrill, childish voices sounded suddenly outside the tower.

"Let us in," they pleaded. "Please, Uncle Yegor! Be a good fellow!"

But the bell-ringer threw himself furiously against the door, beating with his fists on its iron sheathing.

"Be off with you, curse you!" he shouted hoarsely, choking with rage. "May the thunder strike you!"

"Blind devil!" several voices answered loudly; and there was a swift patter of bare feet, running off.

The bell-ringer stood listening a moment, then drew a quick, sharp breath.

"Perdition take you!" he muttered. "Will there never be an end? May the fever choke you all!"

And then, in an altogether different tone, vibrant with the despair that comes of suffering beyond endurance—

"Oh, Lord! Oh Lord, my God! Why have you forsaken me?"

Moving towards the stairs, he collided with Anna Mikhailovna, still hesitating at the very bottom.

"Who's this? What are you waiting for?" he demanded sharply—then added, more mildly, "That's all right. Don't be afraid. Here—take my arm."

And again, as they climbed the stairs, in the same offensively honeyed tone as in the doorway, he made his plea:

"Will there be a little something for the bell-ringer?"

Anna Mikhailovna fumbled in her purse, in the darkness, and handed him a note. He seized it swiftly. They had come up to the level of the narrow slit in the wall, and in the dim light she saw him press the money to his cheek and feel it carefully with his fingers. His pale face—so like her son's!—twisted suddenly, in the strange, faint light, in an expression of naive and greedy pleasure.

"Oh!" he cried. "Thanks, oh, thanks! Twenty-five rubles! And I thought you

were fooling me, just making mock of the blind fellow. Some people do."

The poor woman's bee was wet with streaming tears. She brushed them hastily away and pushed on to overtake the others, whose voices and footsteps, far ahead, came echoing dully down the stairs to her—like the sound of falling water, heard through a stone wall.

The young people paused at one of the turnings, quite high up, where a narrow window admitted a little air and a tiny ray of light, very diffuse, but clearer than what came up from below. The wall here was smooth, and covered with inscriptions—for the most part, the signatures of people who had visited the belfry at one time or another.

Many of these names were familiar to the young Stavruchenkos, and each such discovery was hailed with jokes and laughter.

"Ah, but here's something of another sort," the student exclaimed, and read off slowly, from a tangled scrawl, '"Many start; few reach the goal.'" He laughed, and added, "I suppose that refers to this ascent."

"Twist it that way if you like," the bell-ringer said rudely, turning away; and his mobile eyebrows betrayed his tension. "There's a verse here, too—a little lower down. It wouldn't hurt you to read it."

"A verse? Where? There's no verse here."

"You're so sure, aren't you? But I tell you, there is. There's lots of things hidden from you that have sight."

He moved down a step or two and passed his hand over the wall, just beyond the reach of the faint beam of daylight.

"Here it is," he said. "And a fine verse, too. Only you won't be able to read it without a lantern."

Pyotr moved to his side and passed a hand over the wall. In a moment he had found these grim lines, cut into the wall by someone now dead, perhaps, a hundred years and more:

Forget not the hour of death,
Forget not the judgement day.
Forget not that life must end,
Forget not Hell's flame for aye.

"A merry Maxim!" the student commented—but, somehow the would-be joke fell flat.

"Don't like it, do you?" said the bell-ringer maliciously. "Well, you're still young, of course, only—who can tell? The hour of death steals on us like a thief in the night." In a somewhat different tone, he went on, "It's a fine verse. 'Forget not the hour of death, Forget not the judgement day.'" And, maliciously again, "Yes, and what comes to us then—there's the point of it all."

They went on up the stairs, and soon came out on the lower belfry platform. This was very high; but an opening in the wall disclosed another stairway, steeper and narrower than the first, which brought them to the upper platform, higher still. Here a delightful view spread out before them. The sun was sinking to the west, casting long shadows over the lowland; and the eastern sky was dark with heavy clouds. Off in the distance, the world lay dim and indistinct in the evening haze, except that, here and there, the slanting beams picked out some whitewashed peasant home from the blue shadows, or

painted a window-pane in ruby red, or sparkled on the cross of some far belfry.

A hush fell over the little company. A breeze blew about them, fresh and pure—free, at this height, from any breath of earth. It played with the bell ropes, and with the bells themselves—making them quiver, now and again, with a faint, long-drawn metallic murmur that suggested to the ear vague, distant music, or perhaps a sighing deep in the bells' copper hearts. Peace and tranquillity breathed from all the quiet countryside.

But there was another reason, too, for the hush that had fallen on the belfry platform. Moved by some common instinct—by the sensation of height, and helplessness, most likely—the two blind youths had moved to the support of the corner pillars, and stood leaning against them, their faces turned to meet the gentle breeze.

And the strange likeness between them now caught every eye. The bell-ringer was a little elder. An ample cassock fell in heavy folds over his wasted frame; and his features were coarser, more roughly cut, than Pyotr's. There were other differences, also, to the searching eye. The bell-ringer

was blond. His nose was a little hooked, and his lips were thinner than Pyotr's. His chin was framed in a short, curly beard, and a moustache was beginning to show on his upper lip. But—in the gestures, in the nervous fold of the lips, in the unceasing movement of the eyebrows, lay that amazing, that almost family likeness that makes so many hunchbacks, too, resemble one another.

Pyotr's expression was somewhat the more peaceful. What in him was a look of habitual melancholy was intensified in the bell-ringer to bitterness—at times, to searing malice. At the moment, however, the bell-ringer too had a milder look—as though the softness of the breeze had smoothed the furrows from his forehead, and filled his soul with the tranquil peace chat rose from the scene below, hidden as it was from his unseeing gaze. The twitching of his eyebrows was growing less and less.

Then, suddenly, his eyebrows flew up again, and Pyotr's too—as though both had heard some sound down in the valley, inaudible to all the others.

"Church bells," Pyotr said.

"That's St. Yegori's, fifteen versts from here," the bell-ringer returned. "They always ring for evening service half an hour before us. Do you hear it, then? I hear it, too. Most people don't."

Dreamily, he went on:

"It's fine, up here. On a holiday, specially. D'you ever hear me ringing?"

The question was put with naive vanity.

"Come and hear me, some day. Father Pamfili—you know Father Pamfili, don't you?—he got these two new bells here, specially for me."

He left the support of his pillar to stroke two small bells that time had not yet darkened like the others.

"Fine bells. The way they sing for you, the way they sing! Towards Eastertide, specially."

He reached out for the bell ropes and, with swift finger movements, set the two bells quivering melodiously. The tongues touched so lightly, though distinctly, that the ringing—clearly heard by all the company—could hardly have been audible at even the slightest distance from the belfry platform.

"And you should hear the big one—boo-oom, boo-oom, boom!"

His face was alight with childish pleasure; but even in his pleasure there was something sickly, pitiful.

"Father Pamfili—yes, he got the bells for me," he went on, with a sudden sigh, "but he won't get me a warm coat, not he. Stingy, he is. I'll catch my death, yet, up this belfry. It's so cold! And the autumn's worst of all."

He paused a moment, listening, then said:

"The lame fellow's calling, down below. It's time you were going."

Evelina, who had been watching him all this time as though bewitched, was the first to move.

"Yes, we must go," she said.

And they all turned to the stairs. The bell-ringer, however, did not move. And Pyotr, who had turned with the rest, stopped suddenly.

"Don't wait for me," he said imperiously. "I'll be down in a moment."

Soon the footsteps on the stairs died away. Only Evelina remained, a few steps down. Pressing close to the wall, she had let the others pass, and now stood waiting in breathless suspense.

The blind youths thought themselves alone. For an instant both stood motionless, in an awkward silence, listening.

"Who's that?" the bell-ringer demanded.

"It's me," Pyotr answered.

"You're blind too, aren't you?"

"Yes. And you—have you been blind long?"

"I was born that way. Roman, now—he helps me with the bells—he went blind when he was seven. Look here—can you tell night from day?"

"Yes."

"And so can I. I can feel the light coming on. Roman, he can't. But just the same, it's easier for him."

"Why?" Pyotr asked eagerly.

"Why? Don't you know why? He's seen the daylight. He's seen his mother. Understand? He goes to sleep at night, and he can see her in his sleep. Only she's old now, and he still sees her young. Do you ever see your mother in your sleep?"

"No," Pyotr responded dully.

"Of course you don't. That only happens when a person goes blind, afterwards. But if you're born blind...."

Pyotr's face was shadowed sombrely, as though a storm-cloud had settled over him. The bell-ringer's eyebrows swept suddenly up over his unmoving eyes, in that expression of blind torment that Evelina knew so well.

"Try as you may, a person will sin sometimes, and complain. Oh Lord, our creator! Holy Virgin, mother of God! Let me see the light and the joy, just once, if it's only in my sleep!"

His face twisted, and he went on, with his former bitterness:

"But no, they won't do even that. Dreams come, sometimes, only—so faint, you can't remember them when you're awake."

He stopped suddenly, listening. His face turned pale, and a strange, convulsive movement distorted every feature.

"The imps are in," he said angrily.

And, true enough, childish shouts and footsteps were echoing up the narrow stairs, like the roar of an advancing flood. Then, for an instant, all was hushed again. Probably, the children had reached the lower platform, where their shouts flew out into the open. But at once the upper stairway was filled with clamour, and a

merry crowd of children came racing up, past Evelina, to the bell platform. At the top step they paused a moment, then—one by one—slipped quickly through the doorway, where the blind bell-ringer had taken his stand, his face distorted with malice, striking out wildly at them with his fists.

A new figure appeared in the darkness of the stairway. This was evidently Roman. He had a broad, pock-marked face, expressive of the utmost good nature. His sunken eyes were veiled behind shut lids, but his lips were curved in a very kindly smile. He passed Evelina, still pressed against the wall, and moved on towards the platform. In the doorway, Yegor's flying fist collided with his neck.

"Yegor!" he exclaimed, in a deep, pleasant voice. "Brother! Raging again?"

They stood chest to chest now, feeling one another.

"Why'd you let the imps in?" Yegor demanded, in Ukrainian, his voice still loud with anger.

"Let them play," Roman returned good-humouredly. "God's little birds. Why do you scare them so? Hi, little imps! Where have you got to?"

The children, huddled at the corners of the platform, kept very still; but their eyes gleamed with mischief—and, a little, with fright.

Evelina, stealing noiselessly down the stairs, had already passed the lower platform when she heard Yegor's confident step coming down, and Pyotr's. The next moment a burst of joyous shouts and laughter sounded on the upper platform, as the children rushed to throw their arms around Roman.

As the carriage drove slowly out at the monastery gates, the bells began to sound overhead. Roman was ringing for the evening service.

The sun had set, and the carriage rolled through darkened fields. The even, melancholy peals of the monastery bells floated after it through the blue evening shadows.

Very little was said on the way home. All that evening Pyotr kept away from the others, sitting alone in a far corner of the garden and making no response even to Evelina's anxious calls. Not until everyone had gone to bed did he go in, and feel his way to his room.

IV

There were times during the remaining days of their visit at Stavrukovo when Pyotr's earlier animation returned, and in his own way he seemed quite cheerful. He was greatly interested by the collection of musical instruments the elder of the two young Stavruchenkos had accumulated. Many of these were new to him, and he had to try them all—each with its own, individual voice, suited to the expression of its own peculiar shades of feeling. But something, clearly, was oppressing him; and these moments of cheerfulness seemed but brief flashes against a background of increasing gloom.

None of the company ever referred to the bell-tower. The whole excursion seemed forgotten, as though by tacit agreement. But it had affected Pyotr very deeply—that was quite evident. When he was alone—or even in company, in moments of silence, when there was no talk to occupy his mind—he would sink into thoughts of his own, that brought a

bitter look into his face. True, it was a look he had often worn before; but now it seemed harsher, somehow, and—very reminiscent of the blind bell-ringer's.

At the piano, in his moments of least reserve, the quivering of the bells on the high tower came often into his music, and the long-drawn sighing deep in their copper hearts. And as he played, pictures that none of the company had heart to speak of would rise in their memories only too clearly. The sombre gloom of the winding stairs, and the slender figure of the bell-ringer; the consumptive flush on his cheeks, his malice, his bitter complaints. And then, the two blind youths, up on the bell platform—so alike in posture, in expression, in the darting of their eyebrows at every sound or movement. What all these years had seemed to Pyotr's friends an expression of his own, separate individuality now revealed itself to them as the common seal of darkness, lying in equal measure on all victims of its mysterious power.

"Look here, Anna," Maxim said to his sister a few days later, when they were back at home again, "this change that's come over our boy—it started after the trip

we took to the monastery. Did anything out of the ordinary happen there, do you know?"

"Ah, it's all on account of that blind lad we met," Anna Mikhailovna answered, sighing.

She had already sent warm sheepskin coats to the monastery, and money, with a letter to Father Pamfili in which she begged him, so far as it was in his power, to ease the lot of the two blind bell-ringers. True, for all her gentle, kindly heart, she had forgotten Roman at first, and Evelina had had to remind her that there were two to be provided for. "Yes, yes, of course," she had answered Evelina; but her thoughts had obviously been centred on the one—Yegor. It was to him her heart went out in aching pity, not unmixed with a strange, superstitious feeling that in sending him this offering she might propitiate some unknown, but menacing force that was already advancing, casting its grim shadow over her son's life.

"What blind lad?" Maxim demanded, very much surprised.

"Why, the one in the belfry."

Maxim's crutch came down with an exasperated thump.

"Confound these legs of mine! You forget, Anna, that I don't go clambering up belfry stairs any longer. If one could only get a little sense out of a woman! Evelina—see if you can't tell me, then, just what it was that happened in the belfry."

"The bell-ringer who took us up was blind," Evelina began. Her voice was very low. She, too, had grown paler in these last few clays. "Well, and...."

She stumbled, and stopped. Anna Mikhailovna buried her face in her hands, trying to hide the tears that wet her flaming cheeks.

"Well, and—he looked very like our Pyotr," Evelina continued.

"And no one said a word of this to me! But was there nothing else? Because after all, Anna"—and Maxim's voice, as he turned to his sister, softened in gentle reproach— "there's really no such great tragedy in that."

"Ah, it's just more than I can bear," Anna Mikhailovna returned, barely audibly.

"What's more than you can bear? That some blind lad should resemble your son?"

At this point Evelina caught Maxim's eye, and, seeing her expression, he fell

silent. Anna Mikhailovna soon left the room; but Evelina remained, busy, as always, with her embroidery. For a moment, the room was very still.

"Is there more to the story, then?" Maxim asked finally.

"Yes. Pyotr didn't leave the belfry with the rest. He told Aunt Anna"—that had always been Evelina's name for Anna Mikhailovna —"to go down with the others, but he didn't follow her. He stayed behind on the platform, with the blind bell-ringer. Well, and—I stayed, too."

"To eavesdrop?"

The question came almost mechanically —token of Maxim's long years of pedagogy.

"I—I couldn't go away," Evelina answered slowly. "They talked to one another like...."

"Like comrades in misfortune?"

"Yes. As the blind to the blind. And then Yegor asked Pyotr whether he ever saw his mother in his sleep. And Pyotr said no, he didn't. And Yegor—he doesn't, either. But there's another blind bell-ringer there, Roman, and he does see his mother. She's an old woman now, but he still sees her young."

"So. And what more?"

After a moment's hesitation, Evelina raised her eyes to meet Maxim's. Their blue depths were dark with suffering and struggle.

"That other one, Roman—he's kind-hearted, and he seems at peace with life. His face is sad, but there's no malice in it. He wasn't blind from birth. But Yegor..." she paused, then hurried on evasively, "He suffers dreadfully."

"Say what you mean, child," Maxim interrupted impatiently. "He's embittered, then, this Yegor—is that it?"

"Yes. He cursed some children who came up the stairs, and struck out at them with his fists. Whereas Roman—the children seemed to love him."

"Bitter, and resembling Pyotr," Maxim said thoughtfully. "I see, I see."

Again Evelina hesitated, but finally went on—faintly, as though at the cost of painful inner struggle:

"In feature, they weren't really alike at all. It was more a likeness of expression. Until they met, it seems to me, Pyotr had more the look of Roman. But now it's more and more the look of that Yegor. And then,

you see, what I'm afraid of is ... I mean, I begin to think...."

"What is it you're afraid of, my dear child? My clever child? Come here to me."

Maxim spoke with a tenderness so unusual in him that the tears sprang to Evelina's eyes. He lifted a hand to stroke her silky hair.

"What is it you think, then, child? Tell me your thoughts. For you can think—I see that now."

"I think ... I think he feels, now, that anyone born blind is bound to be ill-natured. And he's persuaded himself, I'm afraid, that he must be so too, that there's no escaping it."

"So. I see." Maxim's caressing hand dropped heavily to his knee. "Get me my pipe, will you, my dear? There it is, on the window-sill."

Soon a blue cloud of tobacco-smoke began to form around him, and through the smoke his voice came, grumbling to himself.

So. So. No, that was no good at all.... He had been wrong; his sister had been right. People could really yearn and suffer for lack of things they had never in their lives experienced. And now that instinct had

been reinforced by conscious realisation, both would keep working in the same direction. What an unfortunate encounter! Though after all, as the saying goes, the truth will always out—if not one way, then another.

He could hardly be seen, now, for the swirling smoke. New thoughts and new decisions were ripening in his square-hewn head.

V

Winter came. A heavy snow fell, blanketing roads and fields and villages. At the manor, all was white. The trees in the garden were laden with fluff, as though they had pat out new foliage to replace the withered green. In the drawing-room, a bright blaze crackled in the fire-place; and everyone coming in from out of doors brought with him a whiff of freshness, an odour of new-fallen snow.

In other years Pyotr, too, had felt the poetry of this first winter day. There was that very special stir of energy that always

came with his awakening, on such a morning. And there were all the familiar signs of winter—the stamping of feet in the kitchen, when people came in from the cold; and the creak-of the doors; and the tiny currents of nipping air that scampered all about the house; and the crunching footsteps out in the yard, and the new, wintry sensation that came with every outdoor sound. And then, when he drove out with Iochim into the open fields—what a delight it was to hear the sleigh runners gliding over fresh snow, and the sudden cracklings that sounded in the woods beyond the river, and echoed back from fields and road.

But now the first white day brought with it only a deeper melancholy.

Pyotr pulled on high boots, that morning, and wandered off to the old mill. His feet sank deep at every step in the untrodden snow.

The garden was very still. The frozen soil, so softly carpeted, made no sound underfoot. But the air today was sensitive to sound as at no other time of the year, carrying over great distances, clear and true, the cawing of a crow, or the blow of an axe, or even the light snapping of a

twig. Now and again it brought to Pyotr's ears a strange, ringing sound, as though of glass, rising quickly to a thin, high note, then dying away at what seemed a tremendous distance. This was off at the village pond. The peasant boys were throwing stones to test the thin layer of ice that had formed on the water overnight.

The manor pond had also frozen over. But the river where the old mill stood still flowed between its snow-piled banks and murmured in the sluices, though its current was slower now, and its waters darker.

Pyotr went up to the dam and stood there, listening. The sound of the water had changed. It was heavier, and all its melody was gone. It seemed to reflect the cold that lay, like the hand of death, over all the countryside.

And Pyotr's heart, too, was filled with a chilly gloom. The dark feeling that had stirred somewhere in the utmost depths of his being, on that blissful summer evening —a vague sense of apprehension, dissatisfaction, questioning—that feeling had now grown until it usurped all the room in his soul that had once belonged to joy and happiness.

Evelina was away. She had been gone since the late autumn. Her parents had planned a visit to their "benefactress", old Countess Potocka, and the Countess had written them to be sure and bring their daughter. Evelina had not wished to go, but had yielded in the end to her father's insistence, which Maxim, too, had supported with considerable energy.

Standing now by the old mill, Pyotr tried to gain again the fullness, the harmony of the emotions he had once experienced here. Did he miss her?—he asked himself. Yes, he did. Yet, though he felt her absence, her presence too—he realised—no longer brought him happiness. It brought, instead, a new and poignant suffering, which he felt somewhat less keenly when she was away.

Only so short a while ago, every detail of that evening had been vivid in his memory—her words, the silky feel of her hair, the beating of her heart against his breast. And out of these details he had created for himself a concept of her that filled him with happiness. But now a something shapeless, amorphous—as were all the phantoms that haunted his sightless imagination—had breathed its noxious

breath upon this concept, and shattered it. And he could no longer integrate his recollections into that completeness and harmony which, at the beginning, had filled him to overflowing. There had been a particle, a tiny sand-grain, of something alien lurking from the very outset somewhere deep behind his feeling; and now this particle had so expanded that it seemed to obliterate all else—as a grim storm-cloud obliterates the horizon.

The sound of her voice no longer rang in his ears. The vivid memory of that blissful evening was gone, leaving behind it a gaping emptiness. And something within him, something confined in the deepest depths of his soul, was struggling desperately to fill this emptiness.

He wanted to see her.

A dull aching—that there had always been, of course; but it had long remained no more than a vague, half-realised discomfort, much like a toothache that is not yet acute.

Since his encounter with the blind bell-ringer, consciousness, realisation, had made of this dull ache a piercing pain.

He loved her. And he wanted to see her.

Such was his mood, as day passed after day at the hushed, snow-blanketed manor.

There were times when the moments of happiness rose vividly again in memory, and Pyotr's face would clear, and his melancholy seem to lift. But this never lasted long; and in the end even these moments of comparative brightness were marred by a haunting uneasiness—as though he feared that they, too, would disappear, never to come again. His mood, in consequence, was very uneven, flashes of passionate tenderness and nervous animation alternating with long days of heavy, unrelieved dejection. The piano wept in the dark drawing-room, of an evening, in deep, almost morbid melancholy; and Anna Mikhailovna, listening, shrank with the pain each sobbing note brought to her heart.

In time, one of the worst of her fears materialised. The dreams that had agitated Pyotr's childhood began to visit him again.

Coming into his room when he was still asleep, one morning, Anna Mikhailovna noticed that he seemed strangely uneasy. His eyes were half-open, gleaming dully from under the drooping lids; his face was pale, and his expression troubled.

She paused in the doorway, looking anxiously into his face, trying to guess what might cause his uneasiness. But she saw only that his agitation was swiftly growing, his features tensing more and more in an expression of straining effort.

Then, suddenly, something seemed to move—or had she imagined it?—over the bed. It was the light, a narrow beam of brilliant winter sunlight, slanting in from the window to strike the wall just over Pyotr's head. Again, as she watched, the sunbeam seemed to quiver—and the bright spot on the wall slipped lower down. And again it slipped, and again. Slowly, barely perceptibly, the light was approaching Pyotr's half-opened eyes. And as it approached, his tension grew more and more marked.

Anna Mikhailovna stood motionless in the doorway, unable to tear her eyes from that blazing spot of light. As in a nightmare, she seemed to see its movements—step by quivering step—closer and closer to her son's defenceless eyes. Pyotr grew paler and paler, his drawn face set in that expression of painful effort. Now the yellow light touched his hair. Now its warm glow reached his

forehead. The mother strained forward, in an instinctive effort to protect her child. But—as in a nightmare—her feet were rooted to the floor, and she could not move. Pyotr's eyes opened wide, now; and when the light touched his sightless pupils, his head rose from the pillow as though to meet it. A spasm passed over his lips—a smile, perhaps; or perhaps a moan. And again his face set in its look of straining effort.

But now, at last, Anna Mikhailovna managed to break free of the paralysis that had gripped her limbs. She hurried across the room and laid her hand on Pyotr's forehead. He started, and woke.

"Is that you, Mother?" he asked.

"Yes."

He sat up. For a moment, he seemed only partially conscious. But then the fog seemed to lift, and he said,

"I've had a dream again. I have them often, now. Only— I can never remember them, afterwards."

VI

Pyotr's mood was changing, his deep, but quiet melancholy giving way to fits of nervous irritability. At the same time, his remarkable delicacy of sense perception was noticeably increasing. His keen hearing became keener still; and his whole being responded to the stimulus of light—responded even in the evening hours. He always knew whether the night was dark or moonlit; and often, after all the family had gone to bed, he would walk about the manor grounds for hours, sunk in wordless melancholy, yielding himself to the mysterious influence of the moon's dreamy, fantastic light. Always, at such times, his pale face would turn to follow the fiery globe in its passage across the sky; and its cold beams would be reflected in his eyes.

But when the moon began to set, growing steadily larger as it approached the earth; when in the end, heavily veiled in crimson mist, it slowly sank beyond the snowy horizon, a softer, more peaceful look would come into his face, and he would turn back to the house and go indoors.

What occupied his thoughts those long nights, it would be hard to say. To all who have tasted of the joys and the torment of knowledge and of understanding, there comes at a certain age—to some in greater, to some in lesser degree—a period of spiritual crisis. Pausing at the threshold of life's activities, people look about them, attempting each to understand his place in Nature, his own significance, his relations with the outer world. This is a difficult time, and he is fortunate whose vitality is of such sweeping power as to carry him through it without violent upheaval. For Pyotr, too, there was this added difficulty, that to the universal query—"What do we live for?" he must add his own: "What, being blind, do I live for?" And again, thrusting in upon the very process of such sombre reflection, there was another factor: the all but physical pressure of a need that could not be satisfied. And all this had its effect upon his character.

The Yaskulskys got back shortly before Christmas. Evelina ran at once to the manor, and burst into the drawing-room, bubbling over with excited joy, to throw her arms around Anna Mikhailovna, and Pyotr, and Maxim. Snow sparkled in her

hair, and a gust of frosty freshness came with her into the room. Pyotr's face lit up, at first, with the sudden happiness of her coming; but it soon darkened again, in almost deliberate melancholy.

"I suppose you think I love you," he said gruffly, that same day, when he and Evelina were alone together.

"I'm sure of it," she returned.

"Well, but I'm not sure of it at all," he declared morosely. "No, not at all. I used to think I loved you more than anything on earth. Only now I'm not sure I do at all. You'd do best to drop me, before it's too late, and follow the voices that call you away, out into life."

"Why must you torment me so?"

The gentle reproach broke out against her will.

"Torment you?" Again that look of deliberate, selfish melancholy came to his face. "Yes, so I do. Torment you. And I'll go on tormenting you, all the rest of my life. I can't possibly not torment you. I didn't know, before. But now I know. And it's no fault of mine. The hand that took away my sight, even before I was born—that same hand put this ill nature into me. We're all of us like that—all of us, born blind. You'd

do best to drop me—yes, all of you, turn away from me, because I can only return you suffering for your love. I want to see. Can't you understand? I want to see, and I can't rid myself of that want. If I could only see Mother, and Father, and you, and Maxim—if I could see you once, I'd be satisfied. I'd remember. I'd have that memory to carry with me through the darkness, all the years to come."

Again and again, with remarkable persistency, he returned to this idea. When he was alone, he would pick up now one object, now another, and examine it with infinite care—then, laying it aside, sit pondering over the qualities that he had found in it. He pondered, too, over those distinctions which he was able faintly to perceive, through the medium of touch, between bright surfaces of different colours. But it was only as differences, as comparatives, void of all concrete sense significance, that all these things could reach his receptive centres. Even a sunlit day, now, differed to him from dark night only in this—that the brilliant daylight, penetrating by mysterious, untraceable channels to his brain, intensified his painful seekings.

VII

Coming into the drawing-room, one day, Maxim found Pyotr and Evelina there. Evelina seemed upset, and Pyotr's face was gloomy. He seemed to feel an organic need, nowadays, to search out new and ever new sources of suffering with which to torment both himself and others.

"He keeps asking," Evelina told Maxim, "what people mean when they talk of the bells 'ringing red'.* And I can't seem to explain it properly."

[Red ringing—a term used in Russian in speaking of the pealing of church bells on a holiday.]

"What's the trouble, then?" Maxim asked Pyotr curtly.

Pyotr shrugged.

"Nothing in particular. Only—if sounds have colour, and I can't see it, why, that means I can't perceive even sound in all its fullness."

"You're talking childish nonsense," Maxim returned, sharply now. "You know

perfectly well that's not true. Your perception of sound is fuller than ours by far."

"Well, but what do people mean, then, when they say that? There must be some meaning to it."

Maxim thought a moment.

"It's just a comparison," he answered finally. "Sound is motion, if you get down to it, and so is light. And that being so, of course, they're bound to have certain traits in common."

"What traits, then?" Pyotr persisted. "This 'red' ringing—what's it like?"

Again Maxim stopped to think before answering.

He might go into the science of vibration. But that, he realised, could not satisfy the question in Pyotr's mind. And, too, whoever it was that had first described sounds by adjectives of light and colour had probably had no knowledge of the physical nature of either; yet, clearly, he had felt a resemblance. What resemblance?

A new idea began to take shape in Maxim's mind.

"I don't know whether I can make it altogether clear to you," he said. "But

anyway—this 'red' ringing, to start with. You've heard it time and again, in the city, on church holidays, and you know it just as well as I do. It's simply that the expression isn't used in our parts."

"Wait! Wait a minute!"

Hastily, Pyotr threw open the piano and began to play. Against a background of a few low tones, his skilful fingers set the higher notes, more vivid and mobile, leaping and skipping in endless permutations; and the room echoed to just that joyous, high-pitched clamour of bells that fills the air on a church holiday.

"There!" Maxim said. "That's very like. And none of us could master it better than you have, though we do have eyes to see. Well, and anything red that I may look at, if it has a large enough surface, affects me in much the same way as this 'red' ringing. There's the same feeling of restlessness, of a sort of resilient agitation. The very redness seems to be always changing. The depth, the intensity of the colour slip into the background; and on the surface, now here, now there, you seem to catch fleeting glimpses of lighter tones, swiftly rising and as swiftly disappearing. And all this affects

the eyes very powerfully—my eyes, at any rate."

"How true, how true!" Evelina broke in excitedly. "I get exactly the same feeling. I can never look long at our red table-cloth."

"Nor can some people endure the holiday bells. Yes, I believe I'm right in drawing such a parallel. And while we're at it, the comparison can be carried further. There's another sort of chiming, that people often call 'crimson'. And there's a colour, too, a shade of red, that's called by that same name—'crimson'. Both the sound and the colour are very close to red, only—deeper, milder, more even. Sleigh bells, carriage bells—while they're still new, their tinkling is liable to be sharp, uneven, unpleasant to the ear; but when they've been long in use they 'ring into their own', as lovers of their music put it, and attain this 'crimson' chime. With church chimes, too, you can get the same effect by skilful combination of several of the smaller bells."

Pyotr began to play again—the merry jingle of bells as the post speeds by.

"No," Maxim said. "I should call that too red."

"Oh! I know now."

And the music became more even. Sinking from the high pitch at which it had begun, so vivid and lively, it grew gradually softer, lower, deeper. Now it was the chiming of a set of bells hung under the bow of a Russian troika, speeding away down a dusty road into the distant evening haze—quiet, even, marred by no sudden janglings; fainter and fainter, until the last notes died away in the calm stillness of the countryside.

"That's it!" Maxim said. "You've grasped the difference perfectly. Yes—your mother tried, once, to explain colour to you by means of sound. You were only a youngster then."

"I remember that. Why did you make us give it up? Perhaps I might have learned to understand."

"No," Maxim returned slowly. "Nothing could have come of that. Though it does seem to me that, if you get down deep enough inside us, the effects produced by sound impressions and by colour impressions are really very much alike. We may say of a person, for instance, that he sees the world through rose-coloured spectacles. By that we mean that he is buoyantly, optimistically inclined. Much

the same mood can be induced by the right choice of sound impressions. Both sound and colour, I should say, serve as symbols for the same inner impulses."

Maxim paused to light his pipe, watching Pyotr closely as he puffed. Pyotr sat very still, clearly waiting eagerly. For a moment, Maxim hesitated. Ought he to go on? But the thought passed, and he began again, slowly, abstractedly, as though carried on independently of his will by the strange current his thoughts had taken.

"And, you know—the queerest thoughts come to my mind. Is it mere chance, say, that our blood is red? Because, you see, whenever an idea takes shape in your brain; or when you have those dreams of yours, that set you shivering after you wake, and force the tears to your eyes; or when a man seems all ablaze with passion—at all such times, the blood comes pulsing faster from the heart, racing up in glowing streams to the brain. Well, and—it's red, our blood."

"It's red, our blood," Pyotr repeated musingly. "Red, and hot."

"Yes. Red, and hot. And so, you see—the colour red, and the sounds we may also call 'red', bring us brightness, animation.

They bring, too, the conception of passion, which people also call 'hot', and 'fiery', and 'seething'. And another interesting thing: artists often speak of reddish tones as tones of warmth."

Maxim puffed awhile at his pipe, surrounding himself with blue clouds of smoke.

"If you swing your arm up over your head and down again," he continued, "you'll describe a more or less limited semicircle. Well, then, try to imagine your arm much longer—infinitely long. Then, if you could swing it so, you'd be describing a semicircle infinitely far away. That's where we see the vault of the skies above us. Infinitely far away. A vast hemisphere, even and endless and blue. When it has that aspect, our spirit is calm, unclouded. But when the sky is overcast with clouds—shifting, uneasy, of undefined and changing outline—then our spiritual calm, too, is broken by a feeling of indefinable unrest. You feel that, don't you, when a storm-cloud is approaching?"

"Yes. Something seems to disturb my very soul."

"Exactly. And so we wait for the deep blue to show again, from behind the

clouds. The storm passes, but the blue sky remains. We know that well, and so we can endure the storm. There, then: the sky is blue. And the sea, when it's calm. Your mother's eyes are blue, and so are Evelina's."

"Like the sky!" Pyotr said, with sudden tenderness. "Like the sky. Blue eyes are considered a sign of spiritual clarity. And now, take green. The soil, of itself, is black. And the tree-trunks, in early spring, are black too, or sometimes grey. But then the spring sun sends down its light and heat, and warms these dark surfaces. And the green comes creeping out to cover the blackness. Green grass, green leaves. They must have light and warmth, these green growths; but not too much light, or too much warmth. That's what makes green things so pleasant to the eye. Greenness—it's warmth intermingled with a dewy coolness. It arouses a feeling of tranquil satisfaction, of health—but not by any means of passion; not of the state that people call joyous rapture. Have I made it at all clear to you?"

"N-no, not very. But go on, anyway. Please."

"Well, there's no helping it, I suppose. Let's go on, then. As the summer heat increases, the green growths seem overburdened, as it were, with the very fullness of their vital powers. The leaves begin to droop. And if the heat isn't tempered by the cool damp of rain, the green colour may fade entirely. But then, as autumn draws on, the fruit takes shape, gleaming daily redder among the weary foliage. The fruit is reddest on the side where it receives most light. It seems to concentrate within itself all the vital force, all the summer passion of growing things. So that here too, as you see, red is the colour of passion. And it's used as the symbol of passion. Red is the colour of rapture, of sin, of fury, of wrath and vengeance. The great masses of the people, when they rise in revolt, seek to express the feeling that moves them in the red of their banner, carried like wind-tossed flame over their march. But—again, I haven't made it clear."

"That doesn't matter. Go on."

"Late autumn. The fruit has matured. It falls from the tree, lies helpless on the ground. It dies, yes, but the seed within it lives; and within this seed, potentially, the

new plant already lives, with its luxuriant new leafage, and its new fruit to come. The seed has fallen to the ground. And over it, the sun hangs low and cold. And cold winds blow, driving cold clouds before them. Not only passion—all of life is gently, imperceptibly stilled. More and more, the black earth shows bare through its green coverings. The very blue of the sky turns cold. And then, one day, the snow-flakes in their millions come floating down over this subdued and quiet, this widowed earth. And soon the earth lies smooth, and white, and even. White—that's the colour of the frosty snow; the colour of the loftiest of the clouds, floating up there in the chill, unattainable heights; the colour of the highest mountain peaks, majestic, but barren. White is the emblem of passionless purity, of cold, high sanctity, the emblem of a future life of the spirit, incorporeal. As to black..."

"That I know," Pyotr broke in. "No sound, no movement. Night."

"Yes, and for that reason black is the emblem of grief and death."

Pyotr shuddered.

"Death!" he repeated dully. "You said it yourself. Death. And for me, all the world is black. Always, everywhere."

"That's not true," Maxim returned heatedly. "You know sound, and warmth, and movement. You live among loving friends. There are many who would give up their gift of sight for the blessings you so unreasonably despise. But you're too full of your own selfish grief..."

"And if I am?" Pyotr's voice was tense with passion. "Of course I'm full of it. How else? I can't get away from it. It's always with me."

"If you could get it into your head that there are troubles in the world a hundred times worse than yours; if you could realise that this life you lead, the security, the love you've always enjoyed—that in comparison with such troubles your life is very heaven, why..."

"No, no!" Pyotr broke in wrathfully, on the same high, passionate note as before. "That isn't true! I'd change around with the most miserable beggar, because he's happier than me. All this solicitude for the blind—there's no sense in it at all. It's a great mistake. The blind—they should be put out on the roads and left there, to beg

their living. Yes, I'd be happier if I were a beggar. When I woke in the morning, I'd have my dinner to think of. I'd keep counting the coppers that were given me, and I'd have the worry, always—would there be enough? And then, if there was enough, I'd have that to be happy about. And then there would be the night's lodging to worry over. And if I didn't get enough coppers, I'd suffer with hunger and cold. And with all that I'd never have an empty moment, and ... well, and no hardship could ever make me suffer as I suffer now."

"Couldn't it, then?"

Maxim's voice was cold. Evelina, pale and subdued, saw his eyes turn to her in a look of sympathy and deep concern.

"No, never. I'm convinced of that," Pyotr returned stubbornly, with a new harshness in his tone. "I often envy Yegor now, up in his belfry. Waking up, in the early morning, I think of him—especially if it's a windy, snowy day. I think of him, climbing the belfry stairs..."

"In the cold," Maxim put in.

"Yes, in the cold. He shivers, and coughs. And over and over he curses Father Pamfili, because he won't get him a

warm coat for the winter. And then he takes hold of the bell ropes, though his hands are so freezing cold, and rings the bells for morning service. And he forgets he's blind. Because anyone would feel the cold, up there, blind or not. But me—I can't forget I'm blind, and..."

"And you've no one to curse for anything."

"Yes, I've no one to curse. There's nothing to fill my life, nothing but this blindness. There's no one I can blame for it, of course, but—any beggar's happier than me."

"Perhaps he is," Maxim said coldly. "I won't argue about that. In any case, if life had been harder on you, perhaps you'd be easier to live with."

And, with another pitying glance at Evelina, he took up his crutches and stumped heavily out of the room.

Pyotr's spiritual unrest intensified after this talk, and he was absorbed more and more in his agonising mental labour.

There were moments of success, when his groping spirit stumbled upon the sensations Maxim had described to him, and they merged with his own space impressions. The earth stretched,

dark .and melancholy, away and away into the distance. He tried to survey it all, but it had no end. And over it hung another infinitude. Memory brought back the roll of thunder, and with it a feeling of breadth, of vastness. The thunder would pass, but something would remain, up there—something that filled the soul with a sensation of majesty and serenity. At times this feeling would achieve almost concrete definition—at the sound of Evelina's voice, or his mother's; for were not their eyes "like the sky"? But then abruptly—destroyed by too great definition—the concept that had been rising, seeking shape, from the far depths of his imagination would disappear.

They tormented him, all these dim imaginings; and they brought no shade of satisfaction. He pursued them with such straining effort—yet they remained always so obscure, bringing him nothing but disappointment. They could not assuage the dull ache that accompanied the painful seekings of his afflicted spirit, its vain strivings to regain the fullness of perception life had denied it.

VIII

Spring had come.

In a little town some sixty versts from the manor, in the opposite direction from Stavrukovo, there was a wonderworking Catholic icon, the miraculous powers of which had been assessed with some precision by people versed in matters of this kind. Anyone who came on foot to honour this icon on its fete day was entitled to twenty days' "remission"—in other words, to complete absolution in the other world from any sin or crime committed here on earth in the course of twenty days. And so every year, on a certain day of early spring, the little town would come to life. The old church, decked out for its fete in the first green branches, the first flowers of spring, would send the joyous clamour of its bell echoing over all the town. There would be a constant rumble of carriage wheels, and the streets and squares, even the fields far round about, would be thronged with pilgrims come on foot. Nor were all of these pilgrims Catholics. The fame of the icon had travelled very far, —and it attracted

anguished and distressed of the Orthodox faith as well—city folk, in their majority.

The flood of people on the church road, when the great day came, was vast and colourful this year as always. To an observer looking down on the scene from one of the near-by hilltops, the pressing crowds might well have seemed one living whole: some gigantic serpent stretched out along the road, inert and still—only its lustreless, varicoloured scales stirring and shifting with its heavy breathing. And to either side of the teeming roadway stood the beggars, two endless lines of beggars, stretching out their hands for alms.

Leaning heavily on his crutches, Maxim moved slowly down one of the streets leading away to the outskirts of the town. Pyotr walked beside him, with Iochim.

They had left behind them the clamour of the crowd, the cries of the Jewish peddlers, the rumble of wheels—all the hubbub and uproar that rolled from end to end of the church road. At this distance, it merged into one vast, dull wave of sound—now rising, now falling, never ceasing. Here too, however, though the throng was less, there was a constant tramp of feet, and murmur of voices, and rustling of

wheels on the dusty road. Once, a whole train of ox-carts came squeaking past and turned into a near-by side-street.

The day was cold, and Pyotr, following passively wherever Maxim turned, kept drawing his coat closer about him. Absently, he listened to the hubbub in the streets; but his mind was busy, even here, with those painful seekings that now occupied him constantly.

And then, through this selfish preoccupation, a new sound caught his ear —caught it so forcefully that he threw up his head, and stopped abruptly.

They had reached the edge of the town, where the last rows of houses gave way to long lines of fencing and plots of wasteland, and, finally, the street widened into a broad highway, stretching away between open fields. At this widening of street into road, pious hands had in some past day set up a stone pillar bearing an icon and a lantern. The lantern, true, was never lit; but it swung, creaking, on its hook in every wind. And at the foot of this pillar huddled a group of blind beggars, crowded out of all the better stands by less handicapped competitors. They held each a wooden alms-bowl in his hands; and from

time to time one or another of them would raise his voice in a plaintive chant:

"A-alms for the bli-ind! Alms, in Christ's name!"

It was cold, and the beggars had been there since morning. There was nothing to shelter them from the fresh wind that blew in from the fields. They could not even move about, like others, with the crowd, to warm their limbs. And their voices, raised by turn in their dreary chant, were burdened with unreasoning, inarticulate complaint—with the misery of bodily suffering and of utter helplessness. After the first few notes their cramped chests would fail them, and the chant would fade into a dismal mumbling, that died away in a long, shivering sigh. But even these last, faintest notes, all but drowned in the clamour of the streets, brought to any human ear that caught them a shocked, almost incredulous realisation of the immensity of suffering behind them.

Pyotr stopped abruptly, his face twisted with pain—as though the beggars' wretched wailing were some grim auricular spectre, rising in his path.

"What are you frightened at?" Maxim asked him. "What you hear are those same

fortunate souls you were so envious of, not long ago. Blind beggars, asking alms. They're feeling the cold a bit, of course. But, according to you, that should only make them happier."

"Come away from here!" Pyotr cried, seizing Maxim's arm.

"Ah, you want to come away, then! And is that your only response to other people's suffering? No, stop awhile. I've been wanting to have a serious talk with you, and this is a very good place for what I have to say. Well, then—you keep grumbling because times have changed, and blind youths aren't cut down any more in battle by night, like that young bandurist—Yurko. You chafe because you've no one to curse like Yegor in his belfry. And in your heart you do curse, too—curse your own people, because they've deprived you of the bliss life brings these beggars. And—on my honour!—you may be right. Yes, on the honour of an old soldier, any man has the right to choose his own way in life. And you're a man already. So that—listen, now, to what I have to say. If you make up your mind to remedy our mistake; if you decide to flout your fate, to throw up all the privileges life has given

you from the cradle, and try the lot of these unfortunates—I, Maxim Yatsenko, promise you my respect, and help, and support. Do you hear me, Pyotr? I wasn't much older than you are now, when I threw myself into fire and battle. My mother wept for me, just as yours will for you. But, the devil take it all, I feel I had the right to do as I did, just as you have that right now. Once in a lifetime, fate gives any man the chance to choose. And so, you need only say the word...."

Maxim broke off and, turning towards the beggars, shouted,

"Fyodor Kandiba! Are you there?"

"Here I am," one of the cracked voices replied. "Is that you, Maxim Mikhailovich?"

"Yes. Come where I told you, a week from today."

"I'll be there," the beggar answered, and once more took up the endless chant.

Maxim's eyes were flashing.

"There you'll meet a man," he said, "who really has the right to grumble against fate, and against his fellow-men. Perhaps you'll learn from him to shoulder your burden, instead of—"

"Come, come away from here," Iochim broke in. He tugged at Pyotr's arm, with an angry look at Maxim.

"Oh, no!" Maxim cried wrathfully. "There's no one yet passed blind beggars by without throwing them a copper, if he can't give more. Do you mean to run off without doing even that? Blaspheme—that's all you know how to do! It's easy to envy other people's hunger, when your own belly's full!"

Pyotr threw back his head as though a whip had struck him. Pulling out his purse, he moved quickly towards the huddled group of beggars. When his groping stick touched the feet of the nearest of them, he bent over him, feeling for the wooden alms-bowl, and carefully laid his money on the pile of coppers in it. Several passers-by stopped to stare at this handsome youth, so clearly of the gentry, fumblingly giving alms to a blind beggar who as fumblingly received them.

But Maxim turned sharply away, and stumped off up the street. His face was flushed, his eyes blazing. He had been seized, evidently, by one of those violent fits of anger that had been so well known to all his acquaintances in his youth. And

he was no longer a pedagogue, weighing and choosing every word. He was a man impassioned, giving full rein to his hot wrath. Only later, after a sidelong glance at Pyotr, did his anger seem to subside. Pyotr was white as chalk. His brows were drawn sharply together, and his face betrayed his deep agitation.

The cold wind set the dust whirling about them as they walked on though the streets of the little town. Behind them, they could hear the blind beggars squabbling over the money Pyotr had given.

IX

Perhaps it was simply the result of a chill; perhaps, the culmination of a lengthy period of spiritual crisis. Perhaps it was a combination of the two. Whatever the cause, the following day found Pyotr ill in his room, in a burning fever. He lay tossing on his bed, his face distorted. At times, he seemed to listen for something; at times, tried to spring up, as though to hurry off

somewhere. The old doctor called in from the town felt his pulse, and talked of the cold spring winds, Maxim, frowning sombrely, avoided his sister's eyes.

The fever was persistent. When the crisis came, Pyotr lay for several days almost without sign of life. But youth is resilient; and he overcame his illness.

One morning Anna Mikhailovna noticed a ray of bright spring sunlight slanting across the sick-bed.

"Pull the curtain to," she whispered to Evelina. "This sunlight—I don't trust it!"

But when Evelina got up to go to the window, Pyotr spoke suddenly—the first words he had uttered in all these weary days:

"No, don't. Please. Leave it as it is."

Joyfully, they bent over him.

"Do you hear, then? Do you know me?" the mother asked.

"Yes," he replied, and paused. He seemed trying to remember something. Then, faintly, he exclaimed, "Ah, that's it!"—and tried to sit up. "That Fyodor—has he come?"

Evelina and Anna Mikhailovna exchanged anxious glances. Anna

Mikhailovna laid her fingers across Pyotr's lips.

"Hush, hush," she whispered. "It's bad for you to talk."

He seized her hand, and kissed it tenderly. Tears rose to his eyes. He let them flow, and they seemed to relieve him.

For some days he was very thoughtful and quiet; but a nervous tremor passed over his face whenever Maxim's footsteps sounded in the hall. Noticing this, the women asked Maxim to keep away from the sick-room. But one day Pyotr himself asked to see him, and alone.

Coming up to the bed, Maxim took Pyotr's hand in his and pressed it gently.

"Well, then, dear boy," he began, "it seems I owe you an apology."

Pyotr's hand returned his uncle's pressure.

"I understand now," he said, very quietly. "You've taught me a lesson, and I'm grateful for it."

"Lesson be damned!" Maxim returned, with an impatient gesture. "It's an awful thing, being a teacher too long. Turns a man's brains into sawdust. No, I wasn't thinking of lessons, that day. I was simply

angry, terribly angry, with myself as well as you."

"Then you really wanted me to?..."

"What matter what I wanted? And who can tell what a man wants, when he loses his temper? I wanted you to get some idea of other people's troubles, and think a little less about your own."

Neither spoke for a moment.

"That chant of theirs," Pyotr said finally. "I never once forgot it, all that time I was out of my head. And that Fyodor you spoke to—who was he?" '

"Fyodor Kandiba. An old acquaintance of mine."

"Was he ... born blind, too?"

"Worse. His eyes were burnt out in the wars."

"And now he goes about chanting that song?"

"Yes, and supports a whole brood of orphaned nephews by it. And has always a cheery word, or a joke, for everyone he meets."

"Really?" Pyotr asked, and went on musingly, "Well, but, say what you will, there's something mysterious about it all. And I'd like..."

"What would you like, dear boy?"

A few minutes later footsteps sounded in the hall, and Anna Mikhailovna opened the door. Looking anxiously into their faces, she could see only that both seemed moved by their conversation, which broke off abruptly with her appearance.

The fever once conquered, Pyotr's young body recovered swiftly. In another two weeks he was up and about.

He was greatly changed. Even his features seemed altered, no longer strained by those spasms of bitter inner suffering that had formerly been so frequent. The shock he had experienced was now followed by a state of quiet musing, tinged with a gentle melancholy.

Maxim feared that this might be only a temporary change, a slackening of nervous tension resulting from physical weakness.

Then, one day, as evening was gathering, Pyotr sat down to the piano, for the first time since his illness, and began to improvise, as he so liked to do. His music breathed a quiet, gentle sadness, very much in tune with his own mood. And then, all at once, through this quiet melancholy burst the first notes of the blind beggars' chant. The melody disintegrated, and Pyotr stood up abruptly,

his face distorted, his eyes bright with tears. He was not yet strong enough, it seemed, to cope with so forceful an impression of life's dissonance as had come to him in the shape of this cracked, heart-rending plaint.

Again, that evening, Maxim and Pyotr talked long together, alone. And afterwards—the days drew into weeks, and the quiet weeks went by, and there was no change in Pyotr's peaceful mood. The too bitter, too selfish consciousness of his own misfortune which had made his spirit sluggish all those last months, and fettered his native energy, seemed now to have lost its foothold, to have yielded place to other feelings. He set himself aims again, laid plans for the future. Life was reviving within him, and his wounded spirit was putting forth fresh shoots, much as a tree that has been ailing bursts into new life at the first bracing breath of spring.

That very summer, it was decided, Pyotr was to go to Kiev for serious study. A famed pianist was to be his teacher. And only his uncle was to accompany him. On this both Pyotr and Maxim insisted.

X

A britzka turned off the road into the steppe, one warm evening in July, to stop for the night at the edge of a near-by wood. As dawn was breaking, two blind beggars came up the road. One of them was turning the handle of a primitive instrument: a hollow cylinder in which, as the handle was turned, a wooden shaft rubbed against taut strings, producing a monotonous and melancholy droning. In a voice somewhat nasal and cracked with age, but still pleasant to the ear, the other beggar was chanting a morning prayer.

A little further down the road, a train of carts was rumbling along, loaded with sun-dried fish. The carters heard someone hail the two blind beggars up ahead, and saw them turn off the road and approach some gentlefolk who where lounging on a rug beside a britzka drawn up at the edge of the wood. Some time later, as the carters were watering their horses at a wayside well, the beggars caught up with them again. But there were three of them now. The leader, tapping the road before him with his long staff at every step, was an old

man with long, flowing grey hair and a drooping, snow-white moustache. His forehead was covered with old sores, evidently the mark of severe burns, and his eye sockets were empty. A thick cord, slung over his shoulder, stretched back to the second beggar's belt. This second was a tall, sturdy fellow, badly pock-marked, with a sullen, ill-natured look. Like the old man, he strode along with an accustomed swing, his sightless face uplifted as though seeking guidance in the sky. The third of the beggars was a youth, dressed in stiff new clothing of the sort that peasants wear. His face was pale, and there was a hint of fright in his expression. His step was hesitant. How and again he would stop, and seem to listen for some sound behind him—bringing up his companions with a jerk by the long cord that bound them all together.

They made steady progress. By ten o'clock the wood had fallen far behind—no more than a faint blue streak on the horizon. Around them stretched the open steppe. Later, a hum of sun-warmed telegraph wires announced a highway ahead, intersecting the dusty road. Coming out on the highway, they turned off along it

to the right. Almost at once they heard a pounding of horses' hoofs behind them, and the dry sound of iron wheels on the metalled roadway. They stopped, and drew up at the side of the road. Again the wooden shaft began to turn, grinding out its melancholy drone, and the cracked old voice took up the chant:

"A-alms for the bli-ind...."

And as the chant continued, the youngest of the beggars joined the droning accompaniment with a soft thrumming of strings.

A coin clinked at old Kandiba's feet, and the sound of the wheels on the roadway stopped. The giver, evidently, wanted to be sure that his offering was not lost. Kandiba quickly found the coin. As he fingered it, his face lit with satisfaction.

"God save you," he said, turning again to face the vehicle in the road.

It was a britzka, occupied by a grey-haired gentleman of broad, square-hewn figure. A pair of crutches lay propped against the seat.

He looked intently at the youngest of the beggars—this old gentleman in the britzka. The youth was pale, but calm—though a moment before, at the first notes of

Kandiba's chant, his fingers had plucked sharply, nervously at the strings, as though attempting to drown out the dismal plaint.

The britzka rolled off again. But, as long as the beggars were in sight, the old gentleman kept looking back at them.

Soon the sound of its wheels died away in the distance. Returning to the roadway, the beggars continued on their way.

"You bring us luck, Yuri," Kandiba said. "And you play right well, too."

A little later, the pock-marked beggar asked,

"For God, is it, you're going to Pochayev? On a vow?"

"Yes," the youth answered, very low.

"Think you'll get your sight back, eh?" This was said with a bitter smile.

"Some people do," Kandiba put in mildly.

"Never met any such, all the years I've been on the road," the pock-marked beggar returned morosely.

They fell silent, tramping steadily on. The sun rose higher and higher, silhouetting against the straight white line of the highway the dark figures of the beggars and, far ahead, the britzka that

had passed them by. Further on, the highway forked. The britzka took the road that led to Kiev; but the beggars turned off the highway again, to wander on by country roads towards Pochayev.

Soon afterwards a letter reached the manor. Maxim wrote, from Kiev, that he and Pyotr were both well and that things were working out just as they had wished.

And the three beggars tramped on. All three, now, strode along with the same accustomed swing. Kandiba, in the lead, tapping the road before him with his staff at every step. He knew all the roads and lanes, and always reached the bigger villages in time for fair days or holidays. People would gather to hear the beggars' play, and the coins would come clinking into old Kandiba's outstretched cap.

The youthful beggar's hesitancy, his look almost of fright, soon disappeared. Each step he took along the roads brought to his ears new sounds—the sounds of the vast, unknown world for which he had exchanged the sleepy, lulling murmur of the quiet manor. His unseeing eyes opened ever wider. His chest expanded. His keen hearing grew keener still. Gradually, he came to know his companions—kindly

Kandiba and sullen Kuzma. He tramped, with them, in the wake of long trains of squeaky peasant carts; spent many a night by blazing fires in the open steppe; heard the clamour of markets and fairs; stumbled upon human grief and misfortune—and not only among the blind!—that made his heart contract in bitter pain; and, strange as it might seem, found room now in his soul for all these new impressions. The beggars' chant no longer set him trembling. And, as day followed day in this great, roaring sea of life, his painful inner striving for the unattainable subsided and grew still. His sensitive ear caught every new song and melody, and when he began to play a look of quiet pleasure would soften even Kuzma's gloomy features. As they approached Pochayev, their little band grew steadily in number.

* * *

Late that autumn, when the roads were already heaped high with snow, the manor folks' young son came suddenly home, in

the company of two blind beggars. The whole household was taken by surprise. He had been to Pochayev, people said, to pray to the icon of the Virgin there for healing. It was a vow that he had taken.

Be that as it might, his eyes remained clear, yet unseeing, as they had always been. But his soul—that, unquestionably, had found healing in his wanderings. It was as though some fearful nightmare had vanished for ever from the manor.

When Maxim, who had been writing all this time from Kiev, finally got home, Anna Mikhailovna greeted him with the cry,

"I'll never forgive you for this, never!"

But the look in her eyes gave the lie to her stern words.

In the long autumn evenings Pyotr told them the story of his wanderings. And when he sat down to the piano, in the twilight hours, the house would be filled with new melodies, such as he had never been heard to play before.

The trip to Kiev was postponed to the next year. And the thoughts of all the family were absorbed by Pyotr's plans and hopes for the future.

Chapter Seven

I

That same autumn Evelina declared to her parents her unalterable decision to be married to the blind youth "from the manor". Her mother began to cry; but her father knelt before the icons and, after prayer, declared that such, to his mind, was God's very will in the matter.

They were married, and Pyotr's life was filled with a new, quiet happiness. And yet—behind this happiness, somewhere, lurked a haunting, undefined anxiety, of which he was never entirely free. Even at his most radiant moments there was a tinge of doubting sadness in his smile—as though he could not feel that his happiness was really justified, or really lasting. The news that he was, perhaps, to be a father brought a look of sudden apprehension to his face.

Still, the life that he now led left him no leisure for his former fruitless searchings. His days were occupied by serious study, and by growing anxiety for his wife and for the child that was to come. There were moments, too, when all else was crowded back by rising memories of the blind beggars' mournful chant. At such times he would go off to the village, where a new home had been built for Fyodor Kandiba and his pock-marked nephew. Kandiba would take up his kobza; or perhaps they would simply talk, of one thing and another; and, gradually, Pyotr's thoughts would grow calmer, and his plans regain their power to inspire.

He had become less sensitive to light, and the striving to apprehend it, which had cost him such inner effort, had subsided. The deep-lying forces that had been driving him now slumbered, and he no longer stirred them by the conscious effort to fuse heterogeneous sensations into some one understandable whole. The place that these fruitless endeavours had once occupied within him was now filled by vivid memories, and lively hopes. And yet —who knows?—perhaps this very peace that had come into his soul had the effect

of promoting the subconscious workings of his inner being, of helping the formless, disparate impressions that reached his nerve centres in their quest for synthesis, for fusion. For does not our mind often, when we are asleep, easily mould ideas and concepts such as it could never achieve by conscious effort?

II

The room was very still—the same room in which Pyotr had been born. Only an infant's wailing cry disturbed the hush. The child was now a few days old, and Evelina was recovering rapidly. But Pyotr, all these days, had seemed weighed heavily down by a foreboding of approaching sorrow.

The doctor arrived. He took up the baby, and laid it down close to the window. Jerking aside the curtain, he let a bright ray of sunlight into the room. Then he bent over the child, his instruments in his hands. Pyotr sat with bowed head, depressed and seemingly apathetic, as he

had been all these last days. The doctor's proceedings seemed to mean nothing to him at all—as though he knew beforehand what the result would be.

"He's surely blind," he said, again and again. "He should never have been born."

The young doctor made no reply, but went on quietly with his tests. And then, at length, he put down his ophthalmoscope, and his voice sounded calmly, confidently through the room:

"The pupils contract. The child sees, no doubt about it."

Pyotr started, and stood up quickly. Clearly, he had heard the doctor's pronouncement. But—such was the expression on his face—he hardly seemed to have understood it. He stood motionless, one trembling hand on the window-sill for support. His upturned face was very pale, his features set.

Until that moment he had been in the power of an extraordinary agitation—a state in which, though he was hardly conscious of his own being, his every nerve and fibre was alive and quivering with expectation.

He was conscious of the darkness that surrounded him. He distinguished it,

sensed its presence around him, its unbounded compass. It pressed in upon him, and his imagination strained to encompass it, to contend with it. He placed himself in its path, as though to shield his child against this vast, undulating sea of impenetrable blackness.

This was the mood that held him while the doctor was making his silent preparations. He had been uneasy all these months, of course, but—until now—some faint remnant of hope had always persisted. Now his taut nerves, strained to the breaking point, were seized by a grim, agonising fear; while hope shrank, and hid itself away deep in the inmost recesses of his heart.

And suddenly those words, "The child sees"—and everything was changed: fear vanquished, hope sprung into certainty. It was as though swift light had broken on the tense expectancy that filled his being. It was a tremendous upheaval, a cataclysm, invading his shadowed soul as the lightning flashes through dark night—dazzling, vivid. They seemed to burn themselves a blazing path into his brain—those few short words the doctor had pronounced. A spark flashed, somewhere

deep within, and lit the inmost recesses of his spirit. He began to tremble. His whole being quivered, as a taut string quivers when you strike it.

And then, after this lightning flash—then, suddenly, strange visions rose to his eyes, that had lost their power to see even before his birth. Was this light, or was it sound? He did not know. It was sound come to life, sound that had shape, sound flowing in rays, like light. Sound that glowed like the high vault of the heavens; that rolled majestically, like the fiery ball of the sun; that rippled and undulated like the murmurings of the green steppeland; that swayed like the boughs of the dreamy beeches in the garden. That was the first instant; and it was the confused impressions of that instant, only, that remained afterwards in his memory. All that followed was forgotten. But he declared, insisted, afterwards that in those instants that followed he had seen.

What it was he saw, and how, and whether he really saw at all, there can be no telling. Many said it was impossible. But he insisted firmly that it was so—that he had seen the earth and the sky; had seen his mother, his wife, Maxim.

For several seconds he stood there, very still, his upturned face alight. He had so strange a look that all the others turned to stare at him, and a deep hush fell over the room. To all of them, watching him, it seemed that this was not he, standing by the window—not the Pyotr they knew so well. It was someone else, a stranger, unfamiliar. The Pyotr they knew had vanished. A veil of mystery, descending suddenly, had hidden him away.

And, in its shelter, for a few brief instants, he was alone—alone with this mystery that had come to him.

Afterwards, he retained only the feeling of a need allayed, and—the strange conviction that, in these instants, he had seen.

Might this possibly have been true?

Might it be that all those vague, dim perceptions or sensations of light that, in his one-time moments of quivering tension, of reaching-out to the bright light of day, had filtered their way by unknown paths to the dark recesses of his brain—that these clouded sensations now, in his moment of ecstasy, rose up, somehow, before his brain in utter clarity?

And the blind eyes saw the blue heavens, and the bright sun, and the limpid river, and the hillock by it, where he had wept so often in his childhood. And then the old mill, and the starlit nights when he had suffered such torment, and the silent, melancholy moon. Yes, and the dusty country roads, and the straight line of the highway; the trains of carts, catching the sunbeams in their iron wheels, and the colourful crowds among which he had sung the chant of the blind beggars.

Or was it, perhaps, wild visions that rose in his brain—of mountains such as the world has never seen, and fantastic plains, and wondrous trees that swayed on the banks of phantom rivers, in the bright rays of a phantom sun—the sun that had been seen for him by countless generations of his forebears?

Or was there, perhaps, no more than unformed sensations, in those depths of the dark brain of which Maxim had spoken —those depths where light and sound produce like effects of merriment or sadness, joy or anguish?

And what he later recalled—was it simply the music that had sounded, for an

instant, in his soul—a vibrant harmony, intertwining in one all the impressions life had ever brought him, all his feeling of Nature, all his ardent love?

Who can say?

He remembered only the coming of this mystery, and its going—that final instant, when sounds and shapes merged and blended, clashing, quivering, trembling, fading, as a taut string trembles into silence: at first high and loud, then soft, softer, barely audible; like something slipping down an infinite incline, down and away into utter darkness.

And then it was gone, and all was still.

Darkness, and silence. There were still dim visions, trying to take shape in the blackness. But they had neither shape, nor sound, nor colour. Only—somewhere far, far down, the clear modulations of a scale cut through the darkness. And then they, too, slipped down into the infinity of space.

Then it was that the life in the room suddenly reached his ears, in its accustomed forms of sound. He seemed to wake from sleep. But still he stood there, radiant and joyful, pressing his mother's hand, and Maxim's.

"What came over you?" his mother asked him anxiously.

"Nothing. Only ... it seems to me ... I saw you, all of you. I ... I'm not dreaming, am I?"

"And now?" she asked breathlessly. "What now? Do you remember? Will you remember?"

Pyotr sighed heavily.

"No," he said, with some effort. "No. But that doesn't matter. Because ... because I've given all that to him, now. To the boy. And ... and to all...."

He staggered, and lost consciousness. His face grew very pale. But it was still alight with the happiness that comes when a great need has been allayed.

EPILOGUE

Three years passed.

A large audience gathered, at the Kiev "Contracts", [The "Contracts", let us remind the reader, was the local term for the Kiev Fair.] to hear a remarkable new musician. Blind, he was; yet rumour carried the most

fantastic tales of his musical talent, and of his history. He came of a wealthy family, it was said, but a band of blind beggars had stolen him from his home when he was still a child, and he had wandered with them about the countryside until, one day, a famed professor had chanced upon him and discovered his wonderful talent. Or—as others told the tale—he had left home of his own will, and joined this beggar band for some romantic reason. Be that as it might, the hall was full to capacity, and the takings (appropriated to charitable purposes unknown to the audience) complete.

Deep silence fell as a young man came forward on the platform. His face was pale, his eyes dark and beautiful. It would have been hard to believe that he was blind, had not those dark eyes been so fixed, and had he not been guided by a fair-haired young lady—his wife, as many said.

"No wonder he makes such an impression," some sceptic whispered, in the hall. "His very looks are so dramatic!"

That was so. The musician's pale face, with its look of meditative attention, his unmoving eyes, his entire aspect aroused

the expectation of something unusual, something altogether out of the ordinary.

They are all lovers of their native melodies—our southern folk; and even this miscellaneous "Contracts" audience was carried away from the first by the musician's tremendous sincerity. He played no set piece—simply what came into his heart and mind. And through this improvisation breathed his vivid feeling for Nature, his sensitive ties with the direct sources of folk melody. Plastic, melodious, rich in colour, the music came pouring forth into the hall—now swelling into a majestic anthem, now sinking into gentle, pensive melancholy. At times, it would be a thunderstorm, rolling across the heavens, echoing out into space; at times—the soft steppe, swaying the grass on some old burial mound, bringing dim dreams of times long past.

When the last note died away, a storm of frenzied applause broke over the huge hall. And the blind musician sat with bowed head, listening wonderingly to the clamour. But then, once more, he raised his hands and brought them down upon the keys. In an instant, the din was hushed.

It was at this point that Maxim came in. Searchingly, he looked into the faces of the audience. And in all these myriad faces he found the same emotion, the same eager, burning gaze, fixed on the blind musician.

Maxim sat listening—and waiting. He knew so well, more than any other in the hall, the human drama that lay behind this music. At any moment, he feared, this improvisation that poured so freely, with such compelling power, from the musician's very soul, might break off suddenly, as it had so often in the past, on a note of strained and painful questioning, revealing some new wound in the player's heart. But the music continued, rising, strengthening, ever fuller and more powerful, complete master of the welded, tensely listening crowd.

And, as Maxim sat listening, he began to distinguish more and more clearly a something very familiar in the music.

Yes, that was it. The clamour of the street. A great wave rolling, rolling—bright, thunderous, alive—to break, sparkling into a thousand separate sounds; now swelling, rising, now sinking again into a distant, but incessant murmur—calm, unimpassioned, cold, indifferent.

And suddenly Maxim's heart contracted. Again, as in the past, a moan had broken into the music.

A moan broke in, and filled the hall, and died away. And again came the clamour of life, sounding ever clearer, brighter, stronger—mobile, sparkling, joyous, full of light.

No, this was not the old moan of private, selfish grief, of blind suffering and torment. Tears rose to Maxim's eyes. And he saw tears in the eyes of those around him.

"He's learned to see. Yes, that's the truth. He's learned to see," Maxim whispered to himself.

Through lively, vivid melodies, joyous, carefree, unrestrained as the wind in the steppes; through the sweeping, manifold din of life; through folk songs, wistful or solemn, there came again and again, with increasing urgency and power, a new, soul-rending note.

"So, so, dear boy," Maxim silently approved. "Overtake them in the hour of merriment and rejoicing."

Another moment—and the blind beggars' chant hung alone—all-powerful,

all-absorbing—over the vast hall, over the spellbound throng.

"Alms for the blind.... Alms, in Christ's name."

But this was no mere plea for alms, no pitiful wail, drowned in the din of the streets. It carried all that it had held for Pyotr in those past days when he had fled from the piano, with distorted features, at its sound—unable to endure its bitter pain. Now, he had conquered this pain in his soul; and he conquered the hearts of all these people by the power of its truth, profound, appalling. It was black night against the background of bright day, a reminder of sorrow amid the very fullness of joy.

It was as though a thunderbolt had broken over the throng. Every heart trembled, as though the musician's swift fingers were pulling at its strings. The music ceased—but the people sat unmoving. A death-like silence filled the hall.

"Yes, he's learned to see," Maxim told himself, bowing his head. "In place of the old suffering—blind, selfish, not to be allayed—he carries now in his soul a true knowledge of life. He has come to know

other people's sorrows, and other people's joys. He's learned to see, and he'll be able, now, to remind the fortunate of the less fortunate."

And the old soldier's head bowed lower still. He, too, then, had done his work in this world. He had not lived in vain. That was the message that the music bore him —this powerful, soul-commanding music, filling the hall, ruling the throng.

.....

Such was the debut of the blind musician.

1886-1898

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

THE STRANGE ONE

A Story of the 1880’s

I

"Is it a long way yet to a station, coachman?"

'"Tis likely we won't reach it afore the storm. See, how the snow's a-whirlin'? The norther is upon us!"

The snowstorm is indeed drawing near. Evening has brought a sharper nip into the air. The snow cracks weirdly under the runners, and from the shadowy wood comes the howling of the harsh winter wind—the norther. Their branches jutting out above our path, the fir-trees rock

sullenly in the gathering dusk of a winter's early night.

Cold and discomfort! The sledge is narrow, bumping against my sides; the swords and pistols of the guards get in the way, while the sledge bell tinkles a long and dreary chant in tune with the rising blizzard.

But then, luckily, on the edge of the roaring forest there looms into view the light of the stationhouse.

And presently my two guards, with much clanging of their arsenal of arms, shake off the snow in the doorway of a dark, overheated, smoke-begrimed hut—the stationhouse. Bleak and cheerless! The woman of the house sets a splinter of burning wood into a holder.

"Is there anything to eat, woman?"

"Nothing in the house."

"Fish? You've a river nearby."

"What fish we had, the otter ate."

"Surely potatoes...."

"Nay, good sirs, this year's potatoes have all been nipped by the frost."

That was that—but happily enough a samovar turned up. The tea made us warm, and the woman brought in some bread and onions in a bast-basket.

Outdoors the storm gathered force, powdery snow lashed against the window panes, and the flame in the lamp shuddered fitfully.

The woman says, "Stay the night—you can't start out in weather like that."

"Very well, we'll stay," replies one of the guards. "You are in no hurry either, sir? You see what these parts are like, and where you're going, trust my word, 'tis e'en worse."

There now fell a silence on the hut. The woman of the house, too, folded the spindle with the yarn, blew out the light, and retired. Gloom and hush reigned—broken only by the wild pounding of the wind.

I could not sleep. As though precipitated by the bluster of the storm, there rushed into my mind one dismal thought after another.

The same gendarme who spoke before inquired politely: "Not asleep, sir?" He was the senior of the two, a likeable man, with a pleasant, even somewhat refined face. Prompt and proficient at his job, he could afford to be less rigid, and thus dispense with needless restrictions and formalities.

"No, sleep won't come."

For a while neither of us spoke. I sensed that he, too, was still awake, a prey to thoughts of his own. His young subordinate, however, slept the sound sleep of a robust but greatly fatigued person, and from time to time muttered something in his slumbers.

The senior gendarme's husky voice broke in again. "It beats me," he said, "why young persons like yourself, well-bred and educated, as can be seen, do this to their lives."

"Do what?"

"Why pretend, sir? We can see that's not the sort of life you've been used to from your young days."

"What of it? There's been time to get unused...."

"And are you happy about it?" he asked doubtfully.

"Are you about your own lot?"

For a while Gavrilov (let us call my interlocutor by that name) was silent and seemed lost in thought.

"No, I am not happy," he announced. "Trust my word, there are times when I have no use for anything. Why I cannot tell, but sometimes I could lie down and die."

"Do you find the service so hard to bear?"

"Service is service—it's no picnic, to be sure. And we're driven pretty hard by our superiors. But it's not that...."

"What then?"

"Who knows...."

Another pause followed.

"What's the service? You need to look sharp, and that's the gist of it. Besides, I'll be going home soon. I'm a recruit man, and my term will be up shortly. My commander tells me I ought to stay on though. I've got a good name with the force, he says, but in the village... What'll I do there?"

"Will you stay?"

"No. True, as to home... I'm no longer used to the hard peasant toil—and the grub, not to speak of the rough peasant ways, the coarseness."

"Why hesitate then?"

He thought a little and said:

"I'd like to tell you a story—if you're not afraid of being bored. Something that happened to me...."

"I don't mind," I said.

II

I began service in 1874, in a cavalry troop, assigned there directly from the new recruits. I served well, did my best, you might say, mostly on detail—now to a parade, now to a theatre; *you* know how it is. Then, too, I knew how to read and write. My superiors were beginning to take notice of me. Our chief, the major, happened to be a fellow countryman of mine. Seeing as how I tried, one day he summons me into his presence and says: "Gavrilov, I'll have you made a sergeant.... Have you ever gone on deportation routes?" I answer: "Never, Your Excellency!"

"I'll put you down for a subordinate on the next route—to get the knack of it. It's plain sailing really." I replied that I'd do my duty.

It was quite true that I had never been assigned on deportation routes with—well, folk like yourself. Plain sailing it may be. But there are ordinance papers that you have to understand, and situations needing prompt action. Well, then....

About a week later the orderly summons me to our major and along with me a sergeant. The major says: "You're assigned to a deportation route." And to the sergeant: "That's your subordinate, sergeant; he's new on the job." Then he told us to keep our eyes open, and added he was sure we'd cope with the job, like the smart fellows we were. "You're to pick up a Miss Morozova," he went on, "a political exile, at the fortress prison. Here are your ordinance papers. You can collect the travelling money tomorrow—and off you go!"

And so Sergeant Ivanov was to go as my senior and I, a private, was much like the second gendarme with me now. The senior man carries the official pouch, receives the travelling money and the ordinance papers. He signs for everything, keeps accounts—well, and the private with him is his help: he runs errands, keeps an eye on the personal effects, and looks after other such matters.

Next morning when we left headquarters—it was barely getting light—I saw that Ivanov had already had a drink or two. As a matter of fact he was not at all a suitable man for our kind of job and has

long since been demoted. He behaved proper in front of his superiors, and to curry favour with them even informed falsely on his fellows. But once out of his superior's sight, he let himself go and his first thought was a drink.

We came to the prison, submitted a form as required—and stood there waiting. I was curious about the girl-prisoner. I knew we would be going a long way with her—in fact it was this same route, except that you are assigned to a village and she was to a town. Curious I was, I suppose, because it was my first trip, and I wondered—what was a girl political prisoner like?

We waited for almost an hour while her personal effects were being put together; all they amounted to was a light bundle, with a skirt in it, and one or two other things. There were also a few books—nothing else. I thought: her parents must be folk of meagre means. When she was led out I was struck by her youth. She seemed a mere child. Her fair hair was drawn back into a single braid, and her cheeks were flushed. But later I was to see how really pale she was, in fact, chalk-white, all through the journey. I pitied her the moment I saw her. You'll excuse me,

but, of course, I never thought she was wrongly punished. She must have committed some political crime, sure enough, but still I pitied her, pitied her from the bottom of my heart.

While she was getting dressed—putting on her coat and galoshes—we were shown her belongings. It was one of the rules; we were obliged to examine a prisoner's things. We also asked if she had any money with her. She had one ruble and twenty kopecks, which Ivanov took into his keeping. Then he said: "I have to search your person, miss."

She flared at these words. Her eyes blazed, her cheeks flushed deeper. She pressed her lips together in anger. What a look she gave us! It made me cower; I dared not so much as approach her. But Ivanov, quite tipsy as usual, was not to be put off. He walked right up to her. "I've got to, orders is orders!" he said.

She now let out a shout that made even Ivanov back away. Her face became pale, all blood gone from it, her eyes flashed darkly and she was furious. She stamped her foot and spoke hotly. I hardly listened, I must admit. The prison warden, too, got frightened and gave her a glass of water.

"Calm down," he said, "have pity on yourself!" But she let him have it, too. "Boors and lacqueys, that's what you are, the lot of you!" she cried. And she went on hurling abuse at us. Now, surely, that's not the way to talk to people who are over you. Full of venom, I thought her then.... Aristocratic spawn!

In the end the warden took her into an adjoining room from which they soon returned with a woman guard. "We found nothing on her!" the warden said. She glared at him almost laughing right into his face. As to Ivanov—he really did not give a hang, but went on muttering. "It's against the rules. I know my orders!" The warden ignored him. He could see Ivanov was drunk, and a drunken man inspires little faith.

We started out on our journey. As our coach passed through the city streets, the girl-prisoner kept peering out of the window, as if she were saying farewell to the city or searching the streets for people she knew. Ivanov then lowered the curtains. She huddled into her corner and kept her eyes averted. I was sorry for her, I must admit. I lifted the curtain's edge, pretending that I wished to look out of the

window myself, and opened up the view for her. Only she did not look, but kept sitting sullenly in her corner, biting her lips so that I thought the blood would come.

We started out by rail on a clear day in autumn—the month was September. But sunny as it was, a raw wind was blowing—yet our young lady kept opening up the window, and would sit there leaning out to catch the wind. Our orders for transporting prisoners were to keep the windows shut. Ivanov had slumped down on his bunk and was soon snoring; and I could not pluck up the courage to tell her that the window must be kept shut. When I finally did she seemed deaf to my words as though she had not heard them. I waited and then said:

"You're sure to catch cold, miss."

She turned her head, opened her eyes wide and gazed as though she had reason to be surprised.... Then she said: "Let it be!" And the next minute she was leaning out of the window again. I now gave it up and let her do as she pleased.

It seemed that she had calmed down a little. From time to time she closed the window, huddling herself into her light coat for warmth. The wind, as I told you,

was raw and biting. But then she would soon be looking out again—most likely taking joy in the scenery after being locked away in prison. She cheered up and even smiled to herself. At such times it was a pleasure to look at her!... Cross my heart, it was....

The narrator paused to think a little and then continued with a somewhat embarrassed air.

I wasn't broken into the job, of course. Later, after a good many trips, I knew better. But then it looked odd to me—wherefore, I thought, are we taking this chit of a girl to some godforsaken place? Don't judge me too harshly, sir, if I tell you I thought of asking the proper permission to wed the miss. I'll knock the nonsense out of her, I said to myself. After all I was not just anybody—I was an official! There's no denying it, I was young and foolish. I see it now. The priest, at the confessional, said this thought of mine was leading me into evil, for the girl, to be sure, was a godless creature.

From Kostroma we were to go on by a mail-waggon. Most of the time Ivanov was dead drunk and asleep. He only woke up to toss off another bottleful. He reeled when

he got out of the train. That's bad, I thought. I feared he might lose the government money in his keeping. But he got to the waggon all right, tumbled in and was soon snoring for all he was worth. It was very awkward to have our miss sit down beside him. She gave him a look full of disgust—shrinking from him, she curled up and squeezed into a corner. I sat down beside the driver. And now we started out. The wind blew from the north. Even I shivered with the cold. The girl took to coughing badly. She put a handkerchief to her mouth. There were stains of blood on it when she took it away, and it wrung my heart to see them. "Oh, that's bad, miss," I tell her. "You're ill! 'Twas wrong to go on this long journey—and in the cold autumn. Wrong!"

She lifted up her eyes, and now seemed to be quite furious again.

"Are you dull-witted, or something? Isn't it clear I'm not going of my own accord? You're my gaoler, and yet you dare thrust your pity on me!"

"You ought to apply to be put in hospital. 'Tis better than to travel in this cold weather. And it's pretty far you will be going."

"Where?" she inquired.

There are strict orders not to tell prisoners their place of destination. She saw I hesitated and turned away. "Never mind, I didn't really mean to ask—and *you* stop prying into my affairs."

Yet I blurted it out to her, and added, "You see what a far place it is." She tightened her lips, frowned but said nothing.

I shook my head. "You're young, miss," I said, "and you don't know what you're in for!"

I was really annoyed. But she only gave me another of her looks and said:

"There you're mistaken, I do know what I'm in for well enough. But the hospital—thank you! If I have to die, I'd much rather it was out of prison, among my own. And should I recover, I would again prefer it to happen outside the prison walls. Do you imagine the wind or the cold weather to be the cause of my illness? Nothing of the kind!"

Hearing her speak the way she did—about recovering among her *own*—I asked, "Have you relatives where you're going?"

"No, I've no relatives there," she replied. "And the town is strange to me, but I'm

bound to meet exiles like myself—comrades." I was surprised to hear her call strangers "her own"; would anyone bother to give her food without money when they did not know her? But I asked no more questions. She looked displeased—and I did not want to upset her.

"All right," I reckoned. ''Let be! She's not had it hard yet. Wait till she gets knocked about and learns how bitter 'tis to live in strange parts...."

That evening the sky became overcast. A sharp wind rose, and it began to rain. With the mud not yet dried from previous rains, the road turned into a squelchy mass. Mud spattered all of my back, and the girl, too, got her share of splashes. It was bad luck for her—the weather getting so foul. The rain beat into her face, and though we rode in a covered cab, and I had put some matting over the roof for added protection, there were leaks everywhere. I saw that she was chilled. She was all trembling and her eyes were closed. Raindrops trickled down her face. She grew very pale and did not move—as though she fainted. I became quite alarmed. Indeed, it was a bad turn that things took. Ivanov was drunk. There he was snoring, caring for nothing. And I,

so green on the job, could not think of what to do.

We arrived in the town of Yaroslavl close to nightfall. I shook Ivanov awake, and we went to the station. I asked for a samovar to be prepared. There were boats sailing from Yaroslavl. But we had strict orders against taking exiles by boat. For us, though, there was an advantage in boat travel as we could save a little on the fare. But it meant taking a chance. There were policemen, as you know, walking the quay, and local gendarmes—like ourselves—who could report us. But the girl said: "I refuse to go any farther by stage. I don't care how you do it but take me by boat." Ivanov who could barely open his eyes after all the drinks he had was furious. "You have no say in the matter," he said, "and will go where you're taken!" She said nothing to him, but spoke to me:

"I'll not go on! Is that clear?"

I now took Ivanov aside: "Why not go by boat? You'll only gain by it, for you'll save on the fare." He was willing, but afraid. "There's a colonel in charge here, so we better watch our step, but you could go and ask—not me, I feel bad." The colonel's house was a short distance away. "Let's go

together and bring the miss along," I suggested. I was afraid to leave them behind, for Ivanov could drop down drunk somewhere and go to sleep, and the girl could walk off or do herself some harm, for which there would be hell to pay. When we went to the colonel and he asked what we wanted, it was the girl who put the matter before him, but she did not do it in the proper way. Instead of pleading humbly—saying please, do kindly permit—she tackled him in her usual haughty-like manner. "By what right..." she began, and went on with one bold word after another, the kind you political fellows like so much. That's just what gets under the skin of those on top. They want you to be humble. Still, he listened to what she had to say, and replied civilly enough. "There's nothing I can do, the law forbids it!"

"The law!" she sneered.

"Yes, that's the law." The colonel's answer was final.

For the moment I forgot myself, I admit. "It may be the law all right, Your Excellency," I said, "but the young lady's ailing." With a severe look, he asked, "What's your name?" Then turning to her: "And you, miss, if you're ill, had best go to

the prison hospital." She turned and walked away without another word. We followed. She wanted to avoid the hospital, and since she had already refused to go into one in the first place, who could expect her to remain here, in these strange parts, and with practically no money to her name?

There was nothing we could do now. Ivanov fell on me: "A nice mess you've got us into, you dolt; we'll both have to answer." He would not hear of staying overnight in the town and ordered the horses to be harnessed. We were to start out night or no night. The girl had gone into the station-house. She was lying down on a couch trying to get a little warmer when we came in. "Get up, miss, the horses are ready," we told her. She jumped to her feet, drew herself up, and stared straight into our faces. I must say she gave me a fright. "You brutes," she started speaking, so angry and plantive-like, too. And though it was Russian we could not make out much. The words were too clever. In the end she said: "You have the power over me; you can hasten my death. Have it your way, I'm ready to go!" The samovar was on the table, but she had not

had her tea. We brewed our own tea, and I poured some for her. I also cut her a chunk of the white loaf we had brought along. "Help yourself," I said, "it'll warm you up." She now paused in the middle of putting on her galoshes, eyed me curiously, shrugged, and said:

"You're a funny fellow! Have you gone out of your senses to think I'm going to share your tea with you?" How hurt I was by her words! To this day the blood rushes to my face when I think of them. Take yourself, you aren't squeamish about sharing our meals. Nor was the gentleman Rubanov, another exile, the son of an army officer, mind you. But that miss was. She demanded a samovar all to herself, and as you could expect paid double the price for the tea and sugar. And her having no more than a ruble and twenty kopecks!

III

The narrator fell silent. For a while the house subsided into a stillness, broken only by the even breathing of the young

gendarme, and the hiss of the storm outside the window.

"Not napping, are you?" asked Gavrilov.

"No, go on, I'm listening."

After another short pause he continued.

I suffered much on account of her. It rained all night. The weather was beastly. We passed through woods—they moaned something fearful. I could not see her face—it was pitch dark and murky all the time. And yet—would you believe it? There she was before my eyes as though I saw her in broad daylight: the eyes, the angry face, her body chilled to the bone, and the look, fixed on some point ahead of her as though she were turning her thoughts over and over in her mind. When we were leaving the station, I put a sheepskin coat over her shoulders. "That'll keep you warm," I said. But she threw it off: "It's your coat, *you* wear it!" The coat was mine all right, but I thought of an answer. "It's not mine," I said, "it's in the kit for prisoners." Only then did she put it on.

But it did not do her much good: when it became light I saw how awful she looked. After the next station she insisted that Ivanov get in with the coachman. He grumbled, but saw it was best not to cross

her—his head had cleared a bit. I sat down at her side.

We drove on for three whole days and nights, stopping nowhere, for our orders were—not to stop over for the night, except "when overtaken by extreme fatigue", and even then only in well-patrolled towns. And how few towns there are in these parts you know full well.

At last our journey was over. When the town she was assigned to came into sight, what a load it was off my chest! I must tell you, towards the end I almost had to support her in my arms. This was after I saw her lying unconscious, her head getting knocked against the side of the coach with every bump in the road. I lifted her up and let her rest with her weight on my right arm. At first she pushed me away. "Don't you dare touch me," she said. But later she did not mind. Perhaps it was because she fainted again. Her eyes were shut, shadows darkened the lids, but the face was sweet, less angry. She even looked happier, laughed in her sleep and cuddled to me for warmth. The poor girl—might be dreaming of pleasant things. As we neared the town, she came to. The sky had cleared, the sun was looking out, and

she cheered up a bit. But when we arrived, there were orders for her to go on. She was not to stay in that town—a gubernia capital. The local gendarmes were away on missions of their own and so she was to continue in our charge. When I came to tell her we must start, the police station was full of people. They were young ladies, gentlemen, students, obviously from among the local exiles. Like old friends, they shook her hand, asked questions, and before saying good-bye handed her some money and a fine wool shawl to keep her warm on the way.

She was cheerful the rest of the journey, but coughed a great deal. And she never as much as looked our way.

We arrived in the small town of her exile and handed her over to the police. She asked if there was a person by the name of Ryazantsev living in the town and was told there was. Then the district police officer came. He asked if she had an idea where she would lodge. "No," she replied, "but I'll look up Ryazantsev." He gave a shrug. She picked up her bundle and left—without saying good-bye to us.

IV

The narrator paused to listen if I was still awake.

"And you never saw her again?"

"I did, though I wish I hadn't.

...I saw her again soon afterwards. We had just got back when we were sent again to the same part of the country. We were taking there a student exile by the name of Zagryazhsky. He was a jolly young man, who sang songs and liked a drink or two. He was assigned to an even farther place of exile. When we stopped on our way at the very town to which the girl was exiled, I was curious to know how she was getting on. "Is the miss we brought here?" I asked. "Oh, yes, she's here all right," they told me. "But she's a strange one. Soon as she arrived she went off to one of the exiles and has not been seen since. She lives at his place. There's some as say she ails and there's others that say she's his mistress. People will wag their tongues...." I now remembered her saying: "I want to die among my *own."* And I grew so very

curious ... nay, more than that, plainly speaking, I hankered to visit her. And so I will, I thought. She saw no ill-treatment from me, I figured, and I bore her no grudge.

Good folk showed me the way. She lived at the far end of town, in a small house with a low door. I walked into the exile's quarters. What I saw was a light room, kept tidy, with a cot in a corner, and the corner draped-off. There were lots of books on the table, and on the shelves. A tiny place was set apart for a workshop where a bench served as a second bed.

When I came in the girl was sitting on the cot, huddled in her shawl, her legs tucked under her. She was sewing. The exile called Ryazantsev was sitting beside her, on a bench, and reading aloud to her. He wore specs, a serious-like fellow he looked. She listened as she sewed. When I opened the door and she saw me, the girl raised herself a little, caught the man's hand and gasped. The eyes were big, dark and fearful. And her face was even paler than before. She clutched tight at his hand. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Calm yourself!" He did not see me. Then she let go his hand and made to rise. "Fare ye

well!" she said to him. "It looks like they even grudge me a quiet death." At this moment he turned his head and his eyes fell on me. He jumped to his feet, and it looked to me he was going to make a dash for me and kill me. He was a tall man, quite healthy-looking....

They thought I came to take her off again. But then he saw me—standing there, frightened out of my wits, and that I've come alone. He took her hand into his own. "Compose yourself," he said. Then he spoke to me: "And you, young gallant, what brings you here?"

I explained that I came quite on my own, with no special purpose. I had brought the young lady to the town. She had been very sick on the way. All I wanted was to know how she was. He softened. But she was as angry as ever, seething really. Why?—you could ask. Ivanov, to be sure, was not civil enough, but had I not always taken her part?

Now that he understood what it was all about, he turned laughing to her: "See, that's just what I had told you." These words made it clear that there was some talk about me before—she must have told him about the journey.

"Sorry if I scared you," I put in. "I chose the wrong time to come. I'll be leaving now, and don't think poorly of me."

Ryazantsev got up, and, after giving me a searching look, held out his hand.

"Look in on your way back, if you can spare the time," he said.

The girl gave us her mocking smile.

"I can't see any reason for him looking in again," she said, "nor why you should invite him."

"It's quite all right! Let him come if he likes," Ryazantsev said, and added, "Do look in, it'll be all right." I missed much of what they said afterwards. It's because you, gentle folk, can talk smart among yourselves. I would have liked to stay and get the hang of it. But it would be too awkward and—suspicious to them perhaps. And so I left.

We saw the gentleman Zagryazhsky to his destination, and before we knew it were back in that very town. There the police chief summoned the senior guard. "You're to remain here until further orders," he said. "I received a wire to that effect. You have to wait for the mail." We stayed, of course.

There, I thought, I'll go and see them again—if only to find out from the landlord how the young lady was. "She's poorly," the landlord said, "like as not will pass away soon. And if they don't call a priest, I'm afraid I might answer for it." In the middle of our talk Ryazantsev stepped out of his part of the house. He greeted me and said: "So, you're here again? Why don't you come in?" I walked in with a quiet step and he came in after me. "Oh, it's that odd fellow again," said the girl. "Have you sent for him?"

"Of course, I didn't, he came quite on his own." I was too hurt to keep quiet.

"What have I done, miss," I blurted out, "for for you to be so mad with me? Do you take me for an enemy?"

"Just that," she said, "and it's high time you knew it! Of course, you're an enemy!" Her voice now sounded weak and faint, her cheeks flamed red, but she was indeed so comely that I could go on looking forever at her. Then the thought came to me: she won't last long, I must ask her to forgive me. What if she passes away without forgiving me? "Forgive me," I said, "if I have wronged you." I spoke as a good Christian should.... Only there she was

getting enraged again.... "Forgive? Now really! Never! Don't expect it! I may be dying, but there is no forgiveness in my heart for you!"

The narrator fell silent, and after thinking a little continued more softly and intensely.

And again they were deep in their own kind of talk. Being an educated man you might catch the drift of it, and so I'll relate to you the words I remember. The words had stuck in my memory but I don't know their meaning.

Ryazantsev had said: "He's visiting you now not as a gendarme at all. He was one when he took you here, as he will take others. Then he acted on his orders. But has he come here on any orders? What do you say yourself, whatever your name is?"

"My name's Stepan."

"And your patronymic?"

"Petrovich."

"Surely, Stepan Petrovich, you've come here out of fellow feeling, am I right?"

"Of course, out of fellow feeling. You've put it very aptly. Our orders forbid such calls. If my superiors learn of this visit, I'll get into trouble."

"There, do you see that?" he said clasping her hand. And she pulled it away quickly.

"I don't see anything at all. It is you who see and imagine things. As to us (meaning her and myself) we are simple-minded enough to call a spade a spade. Yes, we are enemies! The business of the likes of him is to keep an eye on us; our business is to try and outsmart them. Look at him standing there listening—and I assure you if he knew what we were talking about he'd hurry up and put it all down in a report against us." Ryazantsev turned to me, staring point-blank out of his spectacles. His eyes were sharp but kind. "What have you got to say to that?" he asked. "But no, you needn't explain anything. In fact, I believe it is you who have cause to be offended."

And indeed by the orders and by my sworn office I was expected—if the interest I served was opposed—to tell even on my own father. But since it was not for that I had dropped in, I did feel hurt, indeed touched on the raw. I turned to go, but Ryazantsev stopped me.

"Don't go yet, Stepan Petrovich, stay a while," he said. "It's not nice," he now

spoke to her. "Nor is it so much a matter of your not forgiving or refusing to make peace with him. Perhaps if he had himself got at the bottom of it all, he would not forgive you. It is that you refuse to admit that an enemy, too, can be human. And that makes you no better than a sectarian!"

"If I'm that," she retorted, "you're a lukewarm prig! All you care about is your books."

The word she used made him jump to his feet. It was as though she had struck him a blow, and she now started in fright herself.

"A prig, you say. You know very well that's not true."

"I suppose I do, but did *you* speak the truth?"

"I did, you're every inch the boyarina Morozova...."

She paused to think and then held out her hand to him. He took it. She peered into his face and said: "I believe you are right!" I felt rather foolish standing there and watching them. There was a lump in my throat. Then she turned to me and with a look no longer angry gave me her hand. "I'll tell you what," she said, "I still hold us

to be enemies for life, but I'll shake hands with you. And I do wish, aside from orders, you turn into a human being one day. I'm fatigued," she added to Ryazantsev.

I took my leave. Ryazantsev followed me out. Standing in the yard with him I thought I saw the tears start in his eyes.

"How long will you be staying in the town, Stepan Petrovich?" he asked.

"Another two or three days perhaps, until the mail arrives."

"If you feel like dropping in again," he said, "you' re welcome. You're not a bad fellow considering the job you have."

"I'm sorry, I scared her...."

"You did—next time have the landlady first tell us of your arrival."

"There's just something I'd like to know. You mentioned boyarina Morozova. Would that mean that the young lady, too, is of boyar stock?"

"Boyar or no boyar, but she sure comes of a stock you can break—you've broken her already, as a matter of fact —but never bend. That you saw for yourself. People of her kind do not bend."

I now said good-bye.

V

She died soon afterwards. I did not see the funeral, for I was busy at the police station. It was not until the next day that I ran into Ryazantsev. He looked terrible.

He was a tall fellow, with a serious face. He used to look kindly enough at me before, but this time he met me with a dark scowl. He took my hand to shake it, but then right away dropped it and turned his face away. "I hate the sight of you," he said. "Be off, fellow, be off!" His head sank on his chest and he walked away. I returned to my quarters so put out that I could not take a morsel of food for two days. It was from that time on that a sadness came over me—like a worm eating me.

Next day the police chief called us. "You may go now, your paper has come," he said. The paper was an order for the young lady's further deportation. Too late! The Lord had pity on her, and took the matter in his own hands!

...Mind you, this is not the end of the story. On our way back we stopped at a station. When we walked into the station-

room there was a samovar on the table. There were, too, all sorts of refreshments laid out to which an old lady was treating the station mistress. She was a tiny, neat and cheerful old soul, chattering much, and telling the station mistress all about her own affairs. "See, I sold the house I inherited," she was saying, "packed my belongings, and am now on my way to my little dove. What a surprise it'll be to her! To be sure, the darling will be cross. She'll scold me but I know she'll be happy to see me. True, she wrote to me that I must not come, on no account. But never mind that."

It was as though somebody gave me a poke in my side. I hurried into the kitchen. "Who may that old lady be?" I ask the kitchen wench. "She be none other than the mother of that young lady you took along this way," she answers. I staggered at these words. My face showed how shaken I was. "What's the matter with you, soldier?" asks the wench.

"Be still! Don't you go yelling," I say. "The young lady is dead."

And here the tart—a pretty loose one she was, carrying on with all the travellers—claps her hands in dismay, lets out a loud wail and dashes out of the house. I

picked up my hat, and I walked out, too. The old lady was still talking to the station mistress and her chatter rang in my ears. I can't tell you how terrible I felt on her account. I stumbled down the road—quite a while later Ivanov overtook me with the cart and I climbed in.

VI

...That's the way it was. Then the police chief reported my visit to the exile's home, and the colonel at Kostroma reported, too, the way I pleaded for the young lady. One thing followed another so that my superior would not recommend me for promotion. "You don't deserve to be made a sergeant," he says to me. "You're no better than an old woman. What you need, you fool, is to be put in the cooler." Only the way I felt then I could not care less and was not a bit sorry for what I had done.

And all the while I was unable to put that angry young lady out of my mind. Even as I speak now she is there before my eyes.

What could it mean? Is there any one who could explain it? You're not asleep, are you, sir?

I was not asleep.... The gloom of the little hut tucked away in the woods tormented my soul, and the sad image of the dead girl loomed in the darkness amidst the muffled wailing of the storm....

1880

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

MAKAR’S DREAM

A Christmas Tale

I

This is the tale of the dream which poor Makar who dwelt in a harsh and rigorous clime dreamt—the very Makar who is proverbial for his poor luck.

His birthplace was the out-of-the-way village of Chalgan lost in the wild taiga of Yakutia. Makar's fathers and grandfathers had wrested from the taiga a small piece of frozen ground. And although a hostile wall of dense dark woods surrounded it, they did not lose heart. Soon fences were running across the cleared land, ricks and stacks dotting it, and small smoking yurtas growing fast on it; finally, on a hill, in the

middle of the settlement, like a victory signal, a church steeple shot up into the sky. By and by Chalgan became a big village.

But in the course of the war they waged against the taiga, scorching it with fire, and attacking it with iron, Makar's fathers and grandfathers, almost without knowing it, became themselves a rude part of it. They married Yakut women, and adopted the language and customs of their wives, their own features of the Russian race to which they belonged becoming obliterated and fading altogether with time.

Be as it may, but my Makar remembered well that he came of the early Chalgan peasant stock. It was the place where he was born, where he lived and where he was destined to die. He was exceedingly proud of his lineage, and would now and then call others "foul Yakuts", though, to tell the truth, he himself was in no way different from the Yakuts in the ways and habits of his life. His Russian was poor, and he spoke it seldom; he dressed in animal skins, wore the short native deerhide boots, ate a single flatcake with a brew of brick tea on ordinary days, and on holidays and special occasions consumed

as big a pot of drippings as was put before him on the table. He was extremely adept at riding on the back of a deer, and when he fell ill, he would call the medicine man; the latter, gritting his teeth fearsomely, would hurl himself in a frenzy on the sick man to scare off and expel from his body the illness which had settled there.

Makar slaved, lived in poverty, suffered hunger and cold. But did he have any other thoughts except the constant worry to earn his bread and tea?

Indeed, he had them.

When he was drunk, he wept and bemoaned his lot: "My God, what a life!" Besides, he kept saying that he would get away from everything and go up to the mountain. There he would not work the land nor sow, neither cut nor cart wood; nor would he even grind grain by hand on the millstone. He would only try to save his soul. He did not know what the mountain was like, nor where it was; but he was certain it existed, for one thing, and for another, that it was far away, far enough for him to be out of the reach of the *ispravnik* [Head police officer of the district.] himself.... And, of course, he would not have to pay any taxes....

When sober he dropped the idea—perhaps because he saw the impossibility of finding such a marvellous mountain; but when drunk he grew bolder in his belief. He admitted, however, that he might not reach the right mountain and land on the wrong one. "I'd be lost then," he said. And yet he was determined to go to the mountain one day; if he had not carried out his intention, in all likelihood, it was due to the Tatars selling him poor brandy, which was hopped up with coarse tobacco for added strength, and which quickly sapped him of his vigour and made him ill.

II

It was Christmas Eve. Makar remembered that the following day was a great holiday. And he was overcome by an intense craving for vodka, but he had no money to buy it with. The corn was nearly all gone, and he was already in debt with the local shopkeepers and the Tatars. All the same tomorrow was the great holiday ... on which he should not work—so

what could he do if he did not get drunk? He felt wretched. What a life! There was the greatest feast-day in the whole winter —and he not able to drink a bottle of vodka!

A happy thought struck him. He rose and began to pull on his ragged furcoat. His wife, who was a tall, wiry, remarkably strong and equally ugly woman, wise to all his tricks, guessed his intention at once.

"Where are you off to, you devil? Going to drink vodka by yourself?"

"Hold your tongue! I'm off to buy a bottle and we'll drink it tomorrow." He gave her a slap on the shoulder which nearly threw her off her balance, and winked slyly. Such is the heart of woman: she knew Makar would cheat her, and yet was taken in by her spouse's caress.

He went outdoors, found his old horse in the clearing, led it by its mane to the sleigh and got it into harness. Soon the horse took its master out of the gate, stopped, turned its head and cast a questioning look at Makar who was lost in thought. Whereupon Makar gave the left rein a tug, directing the horse towards the outskirts of the village.

A small yurta stood at the very end of the village. A pillar of smoke, rising from it as from the other chimneys, hid the cold glittering stars and the bright moon behind a white billowing mantle. The firelight from within shone through the blocks of ice which served as windows. It was very quiet outdoors.

In this yurta dwelt strangers from afar. Makar did not know what ill luck had brought them to this distant wilderness, nor did he care in the least. He liked to do a little job for them now and then because they were not exacting and did not haggle about the pay.

Makar entered the yurta, walked straight up to the hearth, and stretched his hands which were numb with frost close to it.

"Tcha!" he ejaculated to inform them that he was cold.

The strangers were at home. A candle burned on the table, wastefully it seemed, for the strangers were not engaged in any work. One of them was lying on his bed, smoking and pensively eyeing the rings of blue smoke as they curled into the air, perhaps following some train of thought. The other was seated by the fireplace, in

thought, too, watching the flames lick the burning logs.

"Hallo!" said Makar, eager to break the uncomfortable silence.

Needless to say, he knew nothing of the sorrows that weighed heavily on the hearts of the strangers, nothing of the memories that haunted them on that very night, of the pictures brought into their mind by the flick of firelight and the smoke. Makar had his own big worry.

The young man sitting by the fire raised his head, and stared at Makar rather blankly as though he had not recognised him. Then he shook his head as though to clear it, and rose quickly from his chair.

"Oh, it's you, Makar! Hallo! It's good to see you. Will you have a glass of tea with us?"

The offer pleased Makar.

"Tea?" he repeated inquiringly. "That's very good!... Real good! Capital!"

He began briskly to take off his things. When he had laid aside his cap and coat, he felt far more at home, and the sight of the samovar with the glowing coals made him turn to the young man with a burst of warm feeling:

"I'm fond of you! It is the truth! So fond of you, so very much! I can't sleep at night for thought of you!"

The stranger turned around with a wry smile on his face.

"You're fond of us, you say?" he said. "Then what is it you want?"

Makar hesitated.

"I do have something in mind," he replied. "But how could you guess? Well, I'll tell you about it after I've had my tea."

Seeing that his hosts had offered him the tea of their own accord, Makar thought he might press things further.

"Any roast meat? I love it," he said.

"No."

"Never mind," said Makar reassuringly. "I'll take it some other time," and added, "some other time, eh?"

"All right."

Makar now took it for granted that the strangers owed him the roast meat; and he never forgot debts of this kind.

An hour later he was sitting in his sleigh, having earned a whole ruble by selling five prospective cartloads of firewood on quite satisfactory terms. True, he had promised solemnly not to spend the money on drink on that same day, knowing

that he would do just that. The pleasure he anticipated stilled any pricks of conscience he might have, and he did not even give a thought to the beating he would be sure to get from his faithful wife when he returned home drunk, having deceived her.

"Where's that you're going, Makar?" one of the strangers called out laughingly when he saw that Makar's horse instead of going straight on turned to the left, to the Tatars, establishment.

"Whoa! Did you ever see such a wretched horse? Where are you going?" Makar shouted, blaming the horse, tugging hard at the left rein, and giving the animal furtive little slaps with the right.

The clever beast whisked its tail reproachfully, and trotted quietly in the needed direction. And then the squeak of the runners abruptly ceased at the door of the Tatar pub.

III

Near that gate there stood several tethered horses with the high Yakut saddles.

In the small hut the air was suffocating. Acrid fumes of poor tobacco formed a thick haze and were slowly blown out into the chimney. Visiting Yakuts sat on benches behind tables on which stood mugs of vodka; here and there were groups of men playing cards. The customers' faces were flushed and streaming with perspiration. The eyes of the players were wildly intent on their cards. Money flashed quickly from one player's pocket into another's. In one corner of the room a drunken Yakut sat on a bundle of straw rocking himself to and fro and singing. In shrill, grating notes, he repeated in a variety of tunes that tomorrow was a great holiday and that today he was drunk.

Makar put down his money and a bottle was handed to him. He tucked it into his bosom and retired unperceived into a dark corner. Pouring himself out one glassful after another, he swilled the brandy

greedily. It was very bitter; it had been mixed three quarters with water owing to the holiday, but the tobacco had been put in freely. After each gulp Makar gasped for breath and saw red rings dancing before his eyes.

He was soon drunk, and he, too, sank down on the straw, locked his arms around his knees and laid his heavy head on them. In this position, he began to produce strange shrill sounds, singing the song that tomorrow was a great holiday and that he had drunk five firewood loads' worth of brandy.

Meanwhile the hut was getting more and more crammed with customers. The Yakuts who had come to attend the church service and drink the Tatar vodka kept pouring in. Seeing that in a short while there might be no more room for newcomers, the keeper stood up and took a good look around him. His eye fell on the Yakut and on Makar in the dark corner.

Whereupon he walked over to the Yakut, grabbed him by the collar of his coat and flung him out of the hut. Then came Makar's turn. As he was a local inhabitant, the Tatar keeper accorded him a greater honour: he opened the door wide and gave

him such a hearty kick that Makar flew out of the hut and fell on his nose upon a mound of snow.

It is hard to say if he felt affronted by such treatment. The snow stuck to his face and penetrated inside his sleeves. With difficulty he dragged himself up from the snow and staggered towards his sledge.

The moon had risen high overhead. The tail of the Great Bear pointed downwards. It was getting frostier. In the north, from behind a hemispheric dark cloud appeared the first fiery flashes of the northern lights.

Aware apparently of its master's state, the horse slowly and prudently wended its way home. Makar sat upon the sledge, rocking himself and singing the same song. He sang that he had drunk five fuel loads' worth of brandy and that his old lady would give him a beating. The sounds that escaped from his throat shrilled and moaned through the evening air. And there was something so doleful and plaintive about Makar's singing that the stranger who had climbed on top of the yurta to shut the chimney felt even more heavy of heart. Meanwhile the horse had brought the sleigh up to a hilltop from which the country around opened to view. The snow

sparkled in the moonlight, but when the light of the moon seemed to fade, the snow grew shadowy and shimmered faintly with the reflected glow of the northern lights. And in that shifting glow the snow-covered hills and the forest on them seemed now to crowd in upon Makar, now to recede far into the distance. Makar thought he saw distinctly the snowy bald patch of Yamalakh Hill on the other side of which he had set traps of or animals and birds.

This launched him on a new train of thought, and he sang joyfully that a fox had been caught in his trap. He would sell the skin the next day and thus escape a beating from his wife.

The bells started to ring when Makar entered his hut, and he at once told his wife that a fox had been caught in his trap. He had quite forgotten that his wife had not shared his bottle, and therefore when she landed him a heavy blow in the small of his back in answer to the joyful tidings, it took him by surprise. And before he had time to throw himself on the bed, she cuffed his neck.

Meanwhile the bells were ringing for the midnight mass in Chalgan, their sounds

floating far away in the air, across the snows.

IV

He was lying on his bed. His head was burning and a fire seemed to be raging inside him. The mixture of brandy and tobacco was like a liquid fire coursing through his veins. Melting snow ran down his face and back in ice-cold streamlets.

His old woman thought he was asleep, but he was awake, and could not get the fox out of his mind. He was now quite sure it had been trapped, even knew in which gin it was caught. He could see it distinctly —kept under by the heavy block, tearing at the hard snow with its claws and trying to escape. Moonbeams streaming through the thick underwood gleamed on its golden fur. And the animal's eyes glowed with a beckoning glint in them.

The vision was too much for him. He rose from the bed and directed his steps towards his faithful horse to drive to the taiga.

What was that? Did his wife grab him by the collar of his coat and was she pulling him back?

No, he has left the village behind him. He could hear the even crack of the snow beneath the runners of the sleigh. He has left Chalgan far behind. The bells were still ringing solemnly. And he could see rows of riders sharply silhouetted with their high peaked hats against the dark line of the horizon. They were Yakuts on their way to church.

Meanwhile the moon sank lower in the sky, while way in the zenith a whitish cloud appeared and shone with a phosphorescent light. The cloud expanded and then suddenly burst with flashes of bright colour spreading on all sides. These flashes leapt across a hemispheric dark cloud in the north which from the contrasting brightness looked even blacker. It became blacker than the taiga towards which Makar was now making his way.

The road wound between low shrubs, with hills on the left and the right. As he drove on, the trees grew taller, and the undergrowth thicker. The taiga was silent and full of mystery. Silvery hoarfrost

rested on the bare branches of the larches. But as the soft glow of the northern lights threaded its way from the tree-tops to the ground below there would suddenly flash into view a snow-bound glade, or, beneath the snow-drifts, the huge skeletons of fallen woodland giants.... Then darkness again, utter silence and the spell of mystery.

Makar stopped his horse. He had reached the spot, quite close to the road, where all the traps were laid. In the phosphorescent light he could see distinctly the low wattle fence, and even the first trap. It was made up of three heavy beams resting on a slightly slanting pole, all held together by a clever contraption of levers and horsehair cord.

Now, this was another man's gin; what if the fox had gone into it? Makar climbed quickly out of his sledge, left his smart little horse standing on the road, and listened.

There was not a sound, except for the solemn chiming of the bells coming from the village, which was now far away and out of sight.

He had nothing to fear. The man to whom the traps belonged, Alyoshka of

Chalgan, who was Makar's neighbour and sworn enemy, was probably in church. Not a single print was to be seen on the smooth surface of the freshly fallen snow. Makar walked around the traps, the snow crunching beneath his tread. The traps were wide open, waiting with gaping maws for their prey. He went back and forth—nothing; he retraced his steps to the road.

Pst!...pst! There was a faint rustling. A fox! It's fur gleamed red in the moonlight so close to Makar that he could see the sharp-pointed ears, and with a whisk of the bushy tail the fox seemed to entice him further into the thicket. The animal now vanished between the trees in the direction of Makar's own traps. And a dull thud soon rang through the woods setting off a broken muffled echo which died down in a far off gulley.

Makar's heart began to pound: the trap had closed.

He broke into a ran, making his way through the undergrowth. The cold twigs struck him in the eyes, powdering his face with snow. He stumbled and gasped for breath.

Presently he reached a clearing which he had made himself. On two sides of it stood trees white with hoar frost, and further down, tapering, ran a path at the end of which was the opening of a trap eagerly awaiting its prey.... He was now close to the spot....

But what did he see? The flicker of a figure on the path near his traps. He recognised Alyoshka—it was his short squat figure, his sloping shoulders, and his clumsy bear's gait. Makar thought that Alyoshka's swarthy face had grown even darker and his grin was wider than usual.

Makar felt deeply outraged. "The scoundrel! He is after my gins." To be sure, Makar had just been himself around Alyoshka's traps. But there was a difference. When prowling about others' traps he feared to be caught, whereas when others trespassed on his ground he was resentful and was most eager to lay his hands on the offender.

And he ran now quickly towards the trap in which the fox had been captured. Alyoshka shuffled with his bear's gait in the same direction. Makar knew that he needed to get there first.

There was the trap with the block down. And from under it he caught a glimpse of the trapped fox's red fur. The fox was tearing up the hard snow with its claws just as he had imagined it would be doing and glared at him with its sharp burning eyes.

"*Tytyma* (Don't touch it)!" shouted Makar in Yakut. "It's mine."

"Tyfyma!" retorted Alyoshka, like an echo, "It's mine."

Both men reached the trap at the same time, and, jostling each other, began lifting the trapping block to get at the fox. As the block came up the animal leapt forward; then it paused, cast a somewhat disdainful look at both men, licked the spot which had been bruised by the block, and ran merrily off with a whisk of its tail.

Just as Alyoshka was going to make off after it, Makar caught hold of the tails of his coat.

"Tyfyma!" he shouted. "It's mine!" And he hurried after the fox himself.

"Tyfyma!" repeated Alyoshka, his voice again ringing echo-like. Makar felt his own coat tails being dragged back and the next moment Alyoshka was running in front.

Makar grew angry. And forgetting about the fox he dashed after Alyoshka.

Faster and faster they ran. Alyoshka's cap was torn from his head by the tree branches, but he did not stop to pick it up, because Makar, shrieking angrily was close on his heels. However, Alyoshka was far more cunning than poor Makar. Suddenly he stopped, turned and bent down his head, which hit the running Makar below the waist and he tumbled down into the snow. And as he fell, the wily Alyoshka snatched the fur cap off his head and disappeared in the taiga.

Makar rose slowly, feeling miserable and outwitted. He could not be in a more wretched frame of mind. To think that the fox had practically been his and now it was gone.... He thought he saw the mocking flick of its tail in the darkness as it scurried away for good.

It grew darker still, and there was only a tiny bit of the whitish cloud visible high above. From its fading glow there spread wearily and languidly the last dying flashes of the northern lights.

Cold stinging streamlets of melted snow trickled down Makar's hot body. The snow had penetrated inside his sleeves, his

collar and into his boots. The accursed Alyoshka had carried off his cap. He had lost his mitts. Things looked bad for him. He knew only too well that it was no joke to be out on such a frosty night in the taiga without a cap or mitts.

He had been walking towards home for some time now, but the way seemed endless. He figured he should have been out of the Yamalakh Hill grounds and in sight of the church steeple. From afar came the ringing of the church bells, and though he thought he was approaching the sound, it became even fainter. Makar's heart sank and despair gripped him.

He was weary and miserable. His legs refused to carry him, his whole body ached. He gasped for breath. His feet and hands were numb with cold. And his hatless head felt as though it were locked in a vice of red-hot steel.

"It looks like I'm lost," the thought throbbed in his head, but he trudged on.

The taiga was still. With a stubborn hostility the trees closed in on him, with no light anywhere in between them, no hope.

"I'm lost!" the thought persisted.

He felt very faint. Shamelessly the tree branches now lashed him in the face,

mocking at his helplessness. A white hare ran across a clearing, sat down on its haunches, moved its black-dotted long ears, and began to wash itself, making faces at Makar. The hare meant to say that he knew Makar well enough, that he was the very Makar who had set traps in the taiga to catch it, and that now it was good to see him having fallen into a trap himself.

Makar's despair grew. Meanwhile the taiga was coming alive—with hostility. Even faraway trees now stretched out long branches to catch him by the hair and lash across the eyes and face. The grouse came out of their holes and stared at him with their curious round eyes, and the woodcocks hopped about between them with outspread wings, chattering loudly, and telling their wives about him and his tricks. Thousands of foxes peeped out of the thicket, sniffing the air, moving their sharp-pointed ears, and eyeing Makar scornfully. The hares sat on their haunches and gleefully informed each other that he had got lost in the taiga.

It was all too much for Makar to bear.

"I am lost!" thought Makar and there and then he made up his mind to get on with it.

He lay down on the snow.

It had become colder. The last flashes of the aurora glowed faintly in the sky, peeping at Makar from between the treetops. A soft treble of the church bells came floating softly through the air from Chalgan.

The aurora shimmered and faded away. The sounds ceased.

And Makar was dead.

V

He was not aware of just how it happened. He only knew that something ought to go out of him; he was expecting it to go out, yet it did not.

Meanwhile he knew that he was dead, and he lay there meekly, quite motionless. He remained motionless so long that he grew tired of it.

It was quite dark when Makar felt someone kick him. He turned his head and opened his eyes.

The larches stood high above him humble and still; they looked ashamed of the pranks they had been playing on him. The shaggy fir-trees stretched out their big, snow-covered arms and rocked softly. And sparkling little snowflakes floated just as softly through the air.

From between the many branches, the bright, kind stars peeped out of the sky. And they seemed to say: "Alas, the poor man is dead."

Over Makar's body stood the old priest Ivan, kicking him with his foot. The priest's long robe was powdered with snow; snow glistened on his fur cap, his shoulders and long beard. Most astonishing it was that the man should be the very priest Ivan who had died four years ago.

He had been a kind-hearted churchman, not troubling Makar too much about the tithes and fees. Makar himself settled the fees for christenings and masses. And he now recalled with a pang of shame that he had been quite close fisted and stingy, paying the smallest fee and at times nothing at all. The priest Ivan did not take

offence; the one thing he insisted on was that he get his bottle of vodka. Moreover, if Makar did not have the money to buy the spirits, priest Ivan would send for it, and share the bottle with him. At such times the priest would generally become dead drunk, but he would rarely fight, and not too hard if he would. In this state, helpless and defenceless, Makar would deliver him into the tender care of his wife.

Yes, he had been a kindly little priest, but he met with a bad death. One day when everybody left the house, and he was lying alone drunk on his bed, he hankered for a smoke. And so he rose from his bed, reeled over to the fireplace to light his pipe, lost his balance, and fell into the fire. When his family returned, there was nothing left of Father Ivan but his legs.

All the parishioners mourned for the good priest Ivan, but as all that remained were his legs, there was no doctor who could help. And it was his legs that were buried; and another priest came in his place.

To think that it was the same Father Ivan who was now standing over Makar, whole, and kicking him lightly with his foot.

"Get up, Makar me lad!" he was saying. "Come along with me."

"Where to?" asked Makar sulkily.

Being lost and dead he had only to lie still, and was no longer obliged to wander through the tractless taiga.

Otherwise, what would have been the point in getting lost?

"We'll go to the Great Toyon!" * [Master or chief in the Yakut language.]

"And why should I go to him?" asked Makar.

"To be judged," said the priest sadly, and in a somewhat sentimental tone of voice.

Makar remembered that indeed after death one is supposed to appear somewhere at a judgment. He had heard it in church. The priest was right; there was no help for it, and he would have to get up.

And so he rose, grumbling that there was no rest for a body even after death.

The little priest went on ahead and Makar followed him. They kept a straight path. The larches humbly moved aside to give them way, as they went eastwards.

Makar noticed with astonishment that the priest left no footprints behind him. Looking down at his own feet, he saw that

there were no traces of his footsteps either; the snow remained perfectly smooth and unfurrowed.

It occurred to him what an advantage this would be, for then he could prowl about undetected around other people's traps, when the priest, who apparently had read his thoughts, turned sharply around and said:

"Stop it! You do not know what every such thought may cost you."

"Of all things!" growled Makar. "Can't a body think what he likes? What's made you grow so strict all of a sudden? Who are you to talk?!"

The priest shook his head reprovingly and walked on.

"Have we far to go?" Makar asked.

"Very far," replied the other dolefully.

"But what shall we eat?" asked Makar worriedly.

"Have you forgotten that you are dead," retorted the priest, turning around, "and that henceforth you need neither food nor drink."

This was not to Makar's liking at all. Needing no food would be all right if there was nothing to eat, but then why wasn't he left in peace to lie in the snow? But to walk

far without eating at all seemed to him a most unreasonable thing to do. And he started to grumble again.

"Do not grumble!" said the priest.

"Very well!" Makar retorted sulkily. But he went on grumbling in his heart and finding fault with everything. "Whoever heard of such a thing? They make a body walk on and on without a morsel to eat!"

He walked on behind the priest, nursing his grudges. They had walked for what seemed a very long time. And though Makar had not seen the dawn yet, it seemed to him that they had been on the road for a whole week or more. They had passed high-peaked mountains and ravines without number, and had left behind them many woods and glades, rivers and lakes. Whenever Makar looked around, the sombre taiga seemed to be receding fast behind them, the high snow-covered mountains fading in the darkness and dipping fast beyond the horizon.

Their way seemed to lead higher and higher. The stars were shining brighter. And presently the setting moon peeped from behind the crest of the hill they were ascending. The moon seemed to be running away from them, but Makar and

the priest were close behind it, until it again began to rise above the horizon. They were now walking on the top of a broad, flat plain.

It grew much lighter than it had been during the early part of the night. The reason for this, of course, was that they were much closer to the stars. The stars were as big as apples, and of dazzling brilliance, while the moon was the size of the bottom of a golden cask, and shone like the sun, illuminating the whole plain from end to end.

Each snowflake on the plain was visible. Many roads ran across the plain and all converged towards a singly spot in the east. People of every description, dressed in all kinds of garb, were walking and riding along these roads.

After peering for some time at a man on horseback, Makar suddenly turned off the road and ran after him. "Stop! Stop!" shouted the priest, but Makar did not heed him. He had recognised in the rider a Tatar who had stolen his horse six years back, and had been dead for five years. There he was riding the selfsame skewbald horse, which galloped friskily, raising a cloud of snow, sparkling and scintillating

with colour in the starlight. Makar was astonished to see how easily and quickly he had overtaken on foot the fast riding Tatar. The other had stopped his horse at once, when he saw Makar come up with him. Makar flew at him in a rage.

"Come with me to the Elder!" he shouted. "The horse is mine! I know it by the slit in its right ear.... Smart, aren't you? You ride another man's horse while its master walks like a beggar!"

"Wait a minute!" the Tatar responded. "There is no need to go to the Elder. It's your horse, you say? Take it back by all means. The confounded brute! This is the fifth year I've been riding it and I have not moved an inch.... People who go on foot keep leaving me behind—which is a shame for an honest Tatar!"

He had raised his leg to get down from the saddle, when the priest came running up panting for breath and dragged Makar away.

"You wretch! What are you doing? Can't you see that the Tatar wants to cheat you?"

"To be sure, he's cheating me!" Makar cried gesticulating angrily. "The horse was as good as any, real fine horse. They

offered me forty roubles for it when it was three years old.... No, fellow, you won't get away with this, if you've spoiled the horse, I shall kill it for the meat, and you will pay me cash down. D'you think you are going to be let off just because you are a Tatar?"

Makar had been working himself up into a fury and shouting on purpose; he was trying to attract a crowd as he had a fear of Tatars. At this point the priest intervened.

"Hush, Makar, hush!" he said. "Have you forgotten that you are dead? What good will the horse do you now? Can't you see you are moving far quicker on foot than the Tatar on horseback? How would you like it, if you had to ride for a thousand years?"

Makar now guessed why the Tatar had been so eager to return, the horse.

"They are shrewd folk!" he thought and turned to the Tatar.

"Very well," he said. "Go ahead and ride, but I intend to go to law about this business, my fellow."

The Tatar pulled down his cap angrily over his eyes, and whipped the horse. The animal pranced up; snow flew up from its

hoofs, but it advanced not a step until Makar and the priest started to move.

He spat out angrily and, turning to Makar, said: "Look here, *dogor* (friend), have you a little tobacco to spare? I am dying for a smoke, and I ran out of my own tobacco four years back."

"A dog is your friend, not I!" Makar retorted angrily. "See here, he's stolen my horse and now he asks for my tobacco. I don't care if the deuce takes you, not a bit."

With these words Makar walked off on his own way.

"You were wrong to deny him a small leaf of tobacco," said Father Ivan. "If you had been kinder, the *Toyon* would have forgiven you no less than a hundred sins."

"Why hadn't you told that to me before?" Makar snapped.

"It's too late to teach you now what you ought to have learned from your priests in your lifetime."

He was enraged. What was the use of having priests? You pay your tithes, and they cannot even instruct you when to let a Tatar have a leaf of tobacco in order to receive forgiveness for your sins. It was no

joke ... one hundred sins ... all for one leaf! To be sure, that was a good bargain!

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "One leaf will do for us, and I will give four to the Tatar. That will make four hundred sins!"

"Look behind you!" the priest said.

Makar obeyed. Behind them stretched the boundless snowy plain. The Tatar now looked like a mere speck, Makar thought he saw the white dust rise from under the hoofs of his skewbald horse, but presently even that little speck vanished from view.

"Oh, well," Makar remarked, "he'll manage without my tobacco. Look at the way he's ruined the horse, the accursed man!"

"No," said the priest, "he had not ruined the horse but he stole it. Do you not remember the old men saying that you cannot ride far on a stolen horse?"

Makar indeed remembered the old men say so, but as he had frequently seen during his life that the Tatars rode to town on stolen horses he had not put much faith in their words. Now, however, he had realised that the old men could speak the truth.

He passed many riders in the plain. They all rode as fast as the first. The

horses galloped with birdlike speed, the riders strained and sweated. And yet Makar kept overtaking them and leaving them far behind.

Most of the riders were Tatars, but quite a few were native of Chalgan. Some of the latter were riding oxen which they had most likely stolen and urged them on with goads.

Makar cast looks of hate at the Tatars and each time he passed one, it was with the remark that it served him right. But with the men from Chalgan he stopped to chat good-humouredly; for them he felt a kinship though they were thieves. He went even so far as to assist them to drive the animals with a switch he picked up on the way, but the men who were riding always fell behind, and soon faded away into mere specks.

The plain seemed boundless. Despite the many persons on horseback and on foot that they kept leaving behind, the plain appeared to be deserted. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—of versts seemed to lie between every one or two travellers.

Among other persons, Makar met an old man he could not recognise, although his face, garb and even his gait seemed to

indicate that he was a native of Chalgan. But Makar could not remember ever having met him before. The old fellow wore a threadbare coat, old leather breeches and torn top-boots made of calfskin. He seemed very old, and what was stranger still, he carried on his back an even more ancient old woman whose feet dragged on the ground. The poor old fellow gasped for breath, stumbled under his burden, and leaned heavily on his staff. Makar felt sorry for him. He halted, and so did the old man.

"*Kapse* (speak)," said Makar cordially.

"I've nothing to say," returned the old man.

"What have you heard?"

"Nothing."

"What have you seen?"

"I've seen nothing."

Makar held his tongue for a while, after which he deemed it right to ask the old man who he was and whither he was bound.

After giving his name, the old man told him that many years ago, how many he did not know himself, he had abandoned the village of Chalgan and gone to live on the mountain to save his soul. There he never

did a stitch of work, lived on berries and roots, neither ploughed nor sowed, nor ground the corn, nor did he pay any taxes. When he died and appeared before the *Toyon* for judgment, the latter asked him who he was, and what he had been doing. He replied that he lived on the mountain to gain his salvation. "Very well," said the *Toyon,* "but where is your old woman? Go and fetch her." Off he went to fetch her only to find that his old woman had turned into a beggar. There had been no one to provide for her. She had neither house, nor cows, nor bread, and had grown so weak that her legs wouldn't keep her. And so he was obliged to drag her on his back to the Toyon.

The old man started to weep, but the old woman kicked him as if he had been a beast of burden, and said in a feeble, cross voice:

"Go on!"

This made Makar feel even sorrier for the old man, and he was glad that he had never gone up on that mountain. Had he gone he would have fared even worse, because his own wife, a hefty and tall woman, was hard to carry. And were she

to kick him, as if he were an ox, she would soon drive him to a second death.

Out of pity for him, Makar tried to help the old man by holding up the woman's legs, but he was compelled to let go of them after a few steps for fear of tearing her feet off. And then in the twinkling of an eye the old man vanished with his burden.

As they went on, Makar met no other persons worthy of his attention. They passed thieves, loaded with stolen goods like beasts of burden, and crawling along at a snail's pace; fat Yakut *toyons,* sat rocking on their high saddles, their tall hats reaching into the clouds like spires and by their side trotted and hopped poor workmen, lean and light-footed like hares. A sullen, gory murderer slunk past them with roving eyes. In vain he thrust himself into the snow to wash off the blood stains! The snow immediately turned dark red, while the stains on the slayer stood out more distinctly; there was now wild despair and horror in his look. But he pressed on avoiding the terrified glances of other wayfarers.

The souls of little children hovered in the air like tiny birdies. There were big flocks of them, and no wonder! The coarse

food, squalor, the open hearths, and the icy draughts of the yurtas took a toll of them by the hundreds in Chalgan alone. When they caught up with the murderer, they shied away in a whole flock, quite panic-stricken, and long afterwards the rustling of their little wings could be heard in the air.

Makar could not help noting that he moved with considerable speed compared with other travellers, and he lost no time in ascribing this fact to his own goodness.

"Look here, *agabyt* (father)," he said to the priest. "I may have been a little too fond of the bottle in my time, but after all I was a good man.... What do you think? I believe God loves me...."

He eyed the priest closely, wondering whether he could draw him out concerning certain things. But the priest merely said:

"Do not be proud. We'll soon be there, where you will learn for yourself."

Just then Makar noticed that it was less dark in the plain and that it must be dawning. A few rays rose from behind the horizon and they drifted across the sky, extinguishing the bright stars. The moon, too, was blotted out like the stars. The snowbound plain lay wrapped in shadow.

Mists now rose on all sides of the plain, arrayed like a guard of honour.

At one point, in the east, the mists grew lighter and were clad in gold, like warriors.

Then the mists swayed, and the golden warriors bent low.

From behind them the sun rose, settled upon the gilt mountain ridges, and beamed upon the plain flooding it with its dazzling brilliance. And soared the mists now triumphantly in a glorious ring, broke up in the west and, fluttering, drifted off into the heights above.

Makar thought that he heard a marvellous song. It was the very hymn with which the earth greeted the rising sun every day. Only Makar had not paid attention to it before, and this was the first time in all his life that he realised how beautiful the song was.

He stood still listening to it, and refused to go any farther. He could stand there forever listening to it....

Father Ivan touched his arm.

"Let us go in," he said. "We have arrived!"

Only then did Makar behold a great big door which had been concealed by the mists.

He was extremely loath to enter through the door, but there was no backing out—and he obeyed the summons.

VI

They entered a well-appointed, roomy house, and only when he was indoors did Makar realise how frosty it was outside. In the middle of the house was a beautifully adorned hearth. It was made of pure silver, and in it burned a few golden logs which gave off a pleasant warmth that went right through your whole body. The eyes did not smart from the flame of this marvellous hearth, nor did it scorch the skin. It merely made one feel so agreeably warm that Makar would have liked to stand there warming himself for ever. Father Ivan walked up to the hearth and held his hands, numb with cold, towards the fire.

The house had four doors, one was the front door through which they had entered, and the three others seemed to lead to inner rooms. Young men in long white shirts were going in and out of these doors. Makar thought they might be persons working for the *Toyon.* Vaguely he remembered having seen them somewhere, but he could not remember

precisely where. Wonderingly he noted that each of them had two large white wings attached to his back, and it occurred to Makar that the *Toyon* must have other workmen besides these, for it was impossible to pass into the thick woods to fell wood with such a pair of wings.

One of the men walked up to the hearth, and turning his back to the fire, struck up a conversation with Father Ivan.

"Speak!"

"I have nothing to say," replied the priest.

"What news is there in the world?"

"I have heard nothing."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing."

After both were silent for a short while, the priest remarked:

"I have brought a man with me."

"From Chalgan?"

"Yes, he comes from Chalgan."

"In that case I must fetch the big scales."

He walked out of one door, while Makar asked the priest what the scales were needed for and why they must be big ones.

"You see," the priest began, a little embarrassed, "the scales are needed to

weigh the good and the evil you have done in your life. Where most persons are concerned the good and bad actions weigh about the same, but the inhabitants of Chalgan are so sinful that the *Toyon* ordered special scales to be made for them with a huge balance for weighing their sins."

These words made Makar's heart quail. And his courage faltered.

The serving men reappeared carrying a huge balance. One scale was of gold and very small, the other was of wood and extremely large. Under the latter yawned a great big hole.

Makar went up to see if the scales were in order, examining them closely. There appeared to be nothing tricky about them. Both scales were on a level, neither outbalancing the other.

He did not quite understand just how the balance was arranged, and would have preferred the familiar *bezmen* he had used all his life and knew when selling or buying how to turn it in his favour.

[A balance consisting of an arm with a hook on which the object to be weighed is attached.— *Tr.*]

"The *Toyon* comes!" said Father Ivan, smoothing his robe.

The middle door opened and the *Toyon* entered. He was a very ancient man, with a flowing silvery beard that reached to his waist. He was clad in rich furs and fabrics such as Makar had never seen, and wore warm boots trimmed with plush, which Makar remembered having seen an old icon-painter wear.

His very first glance at the old *Toyon* told Makar that he was the same old man Makar had seen painted on the church walls. Only he was now without his son, who was most likely away on some household business of his own. A dove flew into the room and, after fluttering for some time, perched on his knee. The old *Toyon* took to stroking the bird as he seated himself on a chair which had been prepared for him.

The old *Toyon* had a kind face, and when Makar felt his heart grow heavy, he looked at that face and drew comfort from it.

His heart had grown heavy because he had suddenly remembered his whole life down to the smallest details, remembering each step of it, each stroke of the axe, each tree he had felled, each deception he had

practised, and each glass of vodka he had drunk.

He felt ashamed and frightened. But one glance at the old *Toyon* face gave him new courage. And once he felt this new courage, he hoped to be able to conceal some of his bad deeds.

The old *Toyon* now eyed him and asked who he was, whence he came, what his name and age were.

After Makar had answered the questions, the old *Toyon* asked:

"For what deeds can you account in your life?"

"You know them yourself," retorted Makar. "I dare say, you've got them all recorded."

These words were only a trick Makar used to find out from the *Toyon* if everything was indeed written down.

"Speak up yourself," replied the old *Toyon.*

Makar brightened up again.

He started off by enumerating every kind of work he had done, and though he remembered well every blow of the axe he had struck, every branch he had cut down, and each furrow he had made with the plough, he added on thousands of faggots,

hundreds of cartloads of wood, and hundreds of poods of corn sowed.

When he had completed his account, the old *Toyon* told the priest Ivan to fetch the book.

It then dawned on Makar that the priest was the old Toyon's secretary. This angered him greatly because the priest had dropped no hint about this to him.

Father Ivan now brought an enormous book, opened it and began to read.

"Look up the number of faggots," said the old *Toyon.*

The priest looked them up and said sadly:

"He has added as many as thirteen thousand faggots."

"He's lying," Makar shouted truculently. "He can't count right for he's been a drunkard and died an ugly death."

"You had better hold your tongue!" said the old *Toyon.* "Did he charge you unfairly for your weddings or your christenings? Did he extort tithes from you?"

"I won't say he did," replied Makar.

"There you see!" said the old *Toyon.* "As to his fondness for drink, I know of it."

The old *Toyon* was truly angry.

"Read his sins as they are put down in the book," he said. "I no longer trust him, for he is a liar."

Meanwhile the underlings had dropped onto the golden scale the faggots, and the wood, the ploughing—in short all the jobs he had done. There was such a big amount that the golden scale went down, while the wooden one rose so very high that God's young serving men could not reach up to it with their hands and were obliged to fly up and no less than a hundred of them were pulling it down by the rope.

The jobs of this man from Chalgan were heavy indeed!

Father Ivan began reading. He started with the cheating of which there were 21,933 instances. Next the priest proceeded to count the bottles of brandy Makar had drunk—they amounted to four hundred. And as the priest read, Makar saw the wooden scale go down and down reaching to the pit below it.

Aware of how bad things were for him, Makar thought he might improve them, and drawing near scale he tried furtively to keep it up with his foot. But one of the servants caught him doing it and raised quite a row.

"What's happening there?" asked the old *Toyon.*

"He was going to support the scale with his foot," replied the servant.

The *Toyon* turned crossly to Makar.

"I see that you are a cheat, a lazybones and a drunkard! There are debts you have not paid, you owe the priest his tithes, and you have made the *ispravnik* sin by swearing at you!"

It was now to Father Ivan that the *Toyon* addressed himself.

"What man in all Chalgan," he asked, "lays the heaviest load on his horses and drives them the hardest?"

"The Elder of the church," replied Father Ivan. "He carries the mail, and drives the *ispravnik,* too."

The old *Toyon* then said:

"Send this lazy fellow to the Elder. He shall be one of his horses and draw the *ispravnik* till he can work no more.... After that we shall see...."

The old *Toyon* had hardly finished talking when the door opened to let in his son who now seated himself at his right.

"I have heard your verdict," the son said. "I have lived long in the world and know the affairs of the world well. It will

be hard on the unfortunate man to be harnessed to drive the *ispravnik!* But ... be it so! Yet perhaps he has something to say for himself. Speak, my poor fellow!"

A very astonishing thing now happened. The very Makar, who in all his life could not utter as many as ten words in a row, suddenly waxed eloquent. He himself marvelled at the change in him. There now seemed to be two persons: a Makar who spoke, and a Makar who listened to his own words in amazement. He could not believe his ears. His speech flowed smoothly, and he spoke with ardour, one word followed another and then all the words filed up in long neat rows. He was not a bit shy. And if he happened to stumble, he at once regained his confidence and spoke twice as loud. And most important—he felt that his words carried conviction.

The old *Toyon,* who had been cross with him at first, now listened with growing attention, as though assured that Makar was not at all the fool he had appeared to be. At the beginning Father Ivan was aghast and tried to stop Makar by pulling him by the coat-tails, but Makar shook him off and went on speaking. Presently the

priest was reassured and listened beamingly to his parishioner setting forth the truth. And he saw that the old *Toyon* was pleased, too, to hear the truth. Even the young serving men in their long shirts and with white wings who worked for the *Toyon* came from their quarters to the doors and listened wonderingly to Makar's speech, nudging one another as they drank in his words.

He began by saying that he had no desire to become a horse of the church Elder. And not because he feared the hard work but because the verdict was unfair. And since it was a wrong verdict, he was not going to obey it—not for anything in the world. Let them do with him what they please—he did not even care if he were given up to the devils. It was unfair to make him drive the *ispravnik!* Nor let them imagine that he feared to be a horse; for if the Elder overworked his horses he fed them with oats. And he who had been overworked all his life, had never been fed oats.

"Who overworked you?" asked the old *Toyon.*

Who? Why, everybody, and all his life long. The village Elders, the foremen, the

justices and the *ispravniks* were always after him to pay his taxes and the priests to pay the tithes. Hunger and misery drove him hard; he had suffered from the drought in summer and the bitter frosts in winter; the taiga and the frozen soil yielded him nothing! His life had been like that of cattle which are being driven on and do not know where they are going. Did he know what the priest's sermons in church meant and why he had to pay the tithes? Did he know what had become of his eldest son, who had been taken as a soldier? He did not know where he died, nor in what place his poor bones lay!

They said that he drank much vodka. That was true enough; his heart had ached for the vodka.

"How many bottles did you say?" Makar asked.

"Four hundred," replied the priest after consulting the book.

Very well! But was it real vodka? Three quarters of it was water, and one quarter was vodka in which tobacco had been infused to make it stronger. Therefore three hundred bottles may well be struck off his account.

"Is this true?" asked the old *Toyon* of the priest, and you could see the anger still smouldering in him.

"It is the truth indeed," Father Ivan replied hurriedly.

And Makar continued. He had added thirteen thousand faggots. That may be so! He had made only sixteen thousand. Was that not enough? And mind you, he had made two thousand when his first wife was lying ill ... his heart ached, he longed to sit by his sick wife, but he was obliged to go to work in the taiga.... And there he had wept, his tears freezing to his eyelashes, and the cold and the grief going to his very heart ... but he went on working.

Soon afterwards his wife died. And he had no money to give her proper burial. He hired himself out to cut wood so that he could pay for his wife's abode in the hereafter. Knowing what dire need he had of the money, the merchant who hired him paid only ten kopecks for each load.... And his dead wife was lying alone in the cold house, while he went on cutting wood and weeping bitterly. Surely these loads of wood were worth five times and even more of their value!

There were tears on the eyes of the old *Toyon,* and Makar now saw the scales waver: the wooden one went up while the golden sank.

Makar went on speaking. They had everything down in their books, they said. Would they then see if he had ever known affection, kindness and joy. Where were his children? If they died young, he mourned and bewailed them, but those who grew up left him to struggle alone against need and poverty. He had grown old alone with his second wife, and had felt the strength failing him, and miserable old age creep upon him. They were alone, as alone as two lonely fir-trees in the steppe, mercilessly exposed to the cruel snowstorms.

"Is that true?" the old *Toyon* asked once again.

And the priest answered:

"It is perfectly true!"

The scales wavered again ... and the old *Toyon* lapsed into thought.

"How is this?" he said. "After all there are pure and just men living on the earth. Their eyes are clear, their faces are radiant, and their garments spotless.... Their hearts are as tender as bounteous

soil; they receive the good seed, and bring forth the beautiful, fragrant fruit and flowers, the perfume of which is sweet to me. And you? Look at yourself!"

All eyes were turned on Makar, and he felt ashamed. He knew that his eyes were dim, and his face was dark, his hair and beard were matted, and his clothes torn. He had been thinking of buying a pair of boots before his death, in order to appear at the judgment seat as behooves an upright peasant. But he had always spent the money on drink, and now he stood before the *Toyon* in ragged boots, like the worst of the Yakuts.... He felt utterly wretched.

"Your face is dark," went on the *Toyon.* "Your eyes are dim and your clothes are ragged. And your heart is overgrown with weeds and thorns, and wormwood. That is why I love my own that are just and good, and turn my face away from heathens such as you."

Makar's heart stood still. He felt the disgrace of his own existence. He hung his head, but then suddenly lifted it and was moved to speak again.

Who were these just and good men the *Toyon* spoke off? Were they those who

lived in fine palaces on the earth at the same time as Makar had? If so, Makar knew them. Their eyes were bright because they had not shed as many tears as he had, and their faces were radiant because they were bathed in fragrance, and their clean garments had been made by the hands of others.

Makar's head drooped but then he very quickly raised it again.

Did the *Toyon* not see that he, too, had been born like the others—with bright, open eyes, in which heaven and earth were reflected, and with a pure heart which was ready to hearken to all that was beautiful in the world. And if he longed now to hide his miserable and shameful self underground, it was no fault of his ... nor did he know whose fault it was.... The one thing he knew was that there was no patience left in his heart.

VII

Had Makar seen the effect his speech had produced on the old *Toyon,* had he

seen that every word he said fell on the golden scale like a weight of lead, he would have restrained the anger of his heart. But he could see nothing of this, for his heart welled with a blind despair.

He looked back on his past life, which had been so wretched. How had he been able to bear that terrible burden? He had borne it because through the darkness flickered a tiny star of hope. Once he had been alive he thought that perhaps a better lot might still be in store for him. But now that he had advanced towards the end, hope, too, was dead....

Darkness now settled upon his soul, and a fury raged in it, like a storm raging in the steppe in the dead of night. He forgot where he was, before whom he stood—forgot everything save the rage in him....

.....
.....

But the old *Toyon* said to him:

"Wait, poor man! You are not on earth.... There is justice for you here."

And Makar was startled out of his despair. He realised that he was being pitied and his heart softened; his

miserable life looming before his gaze, from the first to the last day, he was overcome by compassion for himself. He burst into tears....

The old *Toyon* wept, too ... and so did Father Ivan. Tears flowed from the eyes of the young serving men, and they dried them with their white flowing sleeves.

The scales started to swing, with the wooden scale now rising higher and higher!

1883

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

THE MURMURING FOREST

A Polesye Legend

Long ago, and long forgotten.

I

The forest murmured....

A perpetual murmur filled these woods —steady, continuous, like the echo of distant chiming, serene and faint, like the crooning of a song, like a vague remembrance of the past. The murmur never ceased, for this was an old and dense pine forest untouched as yet by the timber merchant's saw and axe. A host of stately, centennial pines with powerful ruddy trunks stood in gloomy array, the

rich crowns closing in the ranks overhead. Under the trees it was peaceful, and fragrant with resin; brilliant ferns had pushed their way up through the needle-matted ground and froze stock-still in an opulence of whimsical tassels, with not a leaf stirring; green grass grew tall in shady corners; while clover as though drooping from exhaustion bent under the weight of its heavy blossoms. Up above the murmur persisted, endless and unbroken, and it seemed that faint sighs were heaved by the venerable forest.

These sighs grew heavier and more pronounced as I now rode along the woodland path, and though the sky was hidden from view I could tell from the frowning of the forest that dark clouds were gathering. The afternoon was on the wane. Here and there, in between the tree trunks, penetrated the slanting rays of the setting sun, but the dark shadows of twilight already lurked in the thickets. A storm was drawing on.

All thought of hunting therefore had to be abandoned; the most I could hope for was to reach shelter for the night before the storm broke. With a clatter of hoofs on the naked roots, my horse snorted and

pricked up his ears at the ominous rambling of the woodland echo. And he now galloped all the faster to the familiar lodge.

A dog barked at our approach and in between the thinning trees loomed the clay walls of the lodge. From beneath the overhanging foliage a wreath of blue smoke curled; a crooked cottage with a tousled roof stood in the clearing nestling to the wall of ruddy tree trunks, and seemed half-sunken in the earth, while the proud and graceful pines tossed their heads high above it. In the middle of the clearing rose a clump of densely growing young oak-trees.

It is in this lodge that the forest rangers Zakhar and Maxim, invariable companions of my hunting excursions, live. But they do not seem to be in, for no one is roused by the barking of the great big sheep dog. The only one who is around is the old man, bald-headed, with fierce grey moustaches. He is sitting on the earth-bank around the wall and fiddling with his bask shoe. His moustache ends dangle almost to his waist, and his eyes have the blank stare of one who is making a vain attempt to recollect something.

"Hullo, Grandfather! Is anybody in?"

"Ay, ay!" he exclaims with a shake of the head. "None's in, nor Zakhar, nor Maxim, and Motria, too, is a-roaming in the woods, searching for the cow. The cow has gone off—the bears might have got her.... That's how 'tis. Nobody's in."

"Never mind. I'll wait. I could sit here with you for a while."

"No harm in waiting," he nods. And as I tether my horse to an oak branch he peers at me with his feeble, bleary eyes. The old man is very decrepit; his eyes do not see and his hands shake.

"And who may ye be, son?" he asks when I sit down beside him.

Every time I arrive at the lodge he poses the same question. Then suddenly he seems to remember.

"I know you, I do," he declares, and turns his attention again to the shoe. "My old head's like a sieve, everything slips through it. I am more likely to remember those as is long dead. New people I forget.... I've been living too long."

"Have you been living long in this forest, Grandfather?"

"Ay, ay, long! Way back when the French set foot on our soil, I was here."

"You must have seen a good deal in your lifetime, and can tell a story or two."

He now gives me a bewildered look.

"What have I seen besides the forest, son?... The forest murmurs, murmurs day and night, winter and summer.... And like that tree yonder, so I've lived a lifetime in the forest without thought of it. Now that I am at death's door, I wonder and don't know if I've lived or not.... Ay, ay! See,—what if I haven't lived at all?..."

A shred of dark cloud drifted in from behind the dense tree crowns and cast a shadow on the clearing; the wind rocked the branches of the surrounding pines, and the murmur of the forest rose to a loud crescendo. The old man cocked his head and listened.

Presently he said, "A storm is coming on. I know it is. My, my, there'll be a wild night—pines will break and be pulled out with their roots!... Tis the forest master at his old game," he added in a hushed tone.

"How d'you know that, Grandfather?"

"Ay, ay, I know it, for I know what the trees are saying.... The trees, too, son, get frightened. Take the asp, 'tis a cursed tree. It keeps muttering—and a-trembling even when there is no wind. Now the pine is

playful and a-ringing on bright days, but should a wee wind blow, it gets frettin' and moanin'. But that's not so bad. Just you listen. My sight is poor, but my ear can hear—the oaks are -stirred up in the clearing, too. That's a sure sign there'll be a thunderstorm."

True enough, with a shudder of their sturdy boughs, the clump of short and snaggy oaks, standing in the middle of the clearing, and well protected by the surrounding wall of forest, broke into a low whine, easily distinguishable from the ringing of the pines.

"Ay, ay! D'you hear 'em, son?" he asked with a mischievous childish smile. "I know it: when the oaks are stirred up, the *master*'ll be roaming by night, shatterin' the trees. But not the oaks—he won't break them.... The oak is a mighty strong tree, and a match, e'en for the master, that's how it be!"

"What master is that, Grandfather? You said yourself it's the storm that breaks the trees."

Looking slyly at me the old man wagged his head.

"Ay, ay! I know that! They says nowadays folk believe in nothing, that's

how things be! As for me, I've seen the master as good as I see you, nay, better, for my eyes be feeble now, and then they were young; in my young days my eyes missed nothing!"

"Just tell me, Grandfather, how you were able to see the master?"

"It was much like now—first the pines in the wood took to moanin', not a-ringin', as they always do but moanin': o-oho-oho-o ... o-ho-oh! The moanin' dies away but then comes again, more and more often and plaintive-like. That's because the master will bring lots of them pines down in the night. After a while the oaks start up. By evening the din grows louder, and by night there is hell to pay: the master runs about wild, laughin' and wailin) a-whirlin' and prancin'. He is tryin' to get at the oaks, to pull them out.... I remembers one autumn I looked out of the window. *He* did not like that. He dashed up to the window and took a go at me with the snag of a pine. And he'd 've smashed up my face—may he rot in hell! But I was no fool, I jumped back. See, son, that's how mad the master can get!"

"And, pray, what does he look like?"

"Much like the old willow in the marsh. The spit and image of it! The hair is like withered mistletoe that grows on trees, and the beard's the same, the nose is like a big stump, the mug all gnarled and scabby.... By god, he's an ugly one! May no Christian man look like him ever! God forbid! Another time I saw him quite close, down at the marshland. Should you come here in wintertime, you be sure to see *him* yourself. Get to the top of that hill yonder that's covered with woods, and climb the highest tree, right to the top. There be days you're likely to glimpse him from there: like a white cloud he passes above the trees, a-whirlin' and a-whirlin', tumblin' downhill into the hollow.... He runs about, does he, and then before you know it he's gone. Ay, ay! And wher'er he passes he leaves a white trail of snow. If ye believe not what an old man says, come one day and see for yourself."

The old man became quite garrulous. The gusty, chattering woods and the brewing storm must have stirred the blood in his old veins. He wagged his head, chuckled, and blinked his faded eyes.

Then a shadow flitted across his furrowed forehead. He poked me with an elbow and said somewhat mysteriously:

"But there is one thing to be said for him, son; of course, the master of the forest be a mean rascal, and a Christian will not want to see an ugly mug like his, but the truth is, he won't do a man any real harm.... He'll mock a body, make fun of him, but he won't do him harm."

"But, Grandfather, did you not say he meant to strike you with a snag?"

"Ay, ay! So he did! But it was 'cause he got angry with me for looking at him out of the window, don't ye see? But he won't play mean tricks on ye, once ye mind your own business. That's the kind of forest master he is. And let me tell ye—far more terrible deeds were done in this forest by men. Lord witness, they were!"

The old man cocked his head and kept silent for a minute or so. But when he looked at me again, I caught the flicker of a reawakened memory breaking through the misty film covering his eyes.

"I'll tell ye, son, a tale of our woods. 'Tis something that happened long ago, in this very place. I remembers it like a dream. It all comes back to me, once the forest

starts a-murmurin' loud. Would you care to hear the tale?"

"I would indeed, Grandfather."

"Hark and I shall tell it."

II

My father and mother died long ago, when I was a little boy. And so 'twas I was left a poor orphan alone in the world. Ay, ay! The village folk scratched their heads: "What shall we do with the laddie?" The squire, too, did not know. But then one day comes the forester Roman and says to our folk: "Give me the laddie to take to the lodge, I'll provide his keep and he'll make life more cheerful for me.... " The village folk replied: "You can have him." Roman took me and from that day on I stayed in the woods.

'Twas Roman who reared me. Fearful he was, so help me God. A great big man, with black eyes and a heart no less black looking out of them. This was because all his life long he lived alone in this forest. Folk said the bear and the wolf were brother and nephew to him. Every forest

beast he knew and feared not, but he kept away from his fellow men, wouldn't even look them in the face.... God's my witness, he was that sort of man, and one look from him would send shivers down my spine. But for all that, there was kindness in him. He fed me well, with plenty of pork fat in the gruel, and when he'd shot a duck, we'd feast on the bird. He did not grudge me my food, and that is a fact!

And so we lived, the two of us. Roman would go off to the woods, locking me up in the lodge so that no beast would make a meal of me. This went on until he was given a wife, Oxana by name.

It was the squire's doing. He calls Roman to the village and says: "You've got to take a wife!" To this Roman replies: "What the deuce do I want a wife for? What'll I do with a woman in the woods, when I've got the little fellow to care for? I don't want to marry!" Nor was he one who carried on with wenches! But the squire was a wily one. When I think of that squire I can tell you that there is none like him nowadays. Squires like that one have died out. Take yourself! They tell me you, too, come of gentry stock. Maybe ye do, but

you're not the real stuff. You're measly sort, that's what you are!

That squire was a real one ... of the old breed. I tell you, son, the world is made that way that one hundred people will tremble before a single man. Take the hawk and the chick! Both were hatched out of an egg, but the hawk is up in the sky. He need but let out a cry for the old cock, let alone the chicks, to run for their lives. And so the hawk be a noble bird, and the hen is a lowly fowl....

There be this I remember: I was a little fellow and I sees some peasants, about thirty of 'em, carting big logs from the woods. Just then the squire comes along on that very road, twirling his moustaches. His frisky horse prances and he be looking around proudly. And the moment the men see him, they turn their horses off the road into the deep snow, and doff their caps. What a hard time they have afterwards getting the carts and logs out of the snowdrifts! And squire gallops off—might proud to have the whole road to himself. A lift of his eyebrow could make the peasants tremble, a merry laugh raise their spirits. When his face grew dark, all went in fear.

And there was not a man who dared cross the squire's wishes.

Roman grew up in the forest. And as you'd expect he was boorish. But the squire did not lose his temper with him.

"It is my wish for you to marry," he said, "and whatever for is my own business. You'll wed Oxana!"

"Nay, I shall not," replied Roman. "I need no wife, even if she be Oxana. Let the devil wed her, not me. That's final!"

The squire now ordered the flogging whips to be brought, Roman was laid on the ground.

"Do you agree to the marriage, Roman?" asks the squire. "I do not," retorts he.

"Give it to him," says the squire, "good and hard." They flogged Roman mighty hard. And strong as he was, he got fed up with it all.

"Stop it!" he cries. "I'll do as I'm bid. May the woman burn in hell before I'm going to suffer so many lashes for her. Fetch her and I'll wed her!"

And just as they be whippin' Roman to get him married who should come along but Opanas Shvidld, the squire's steward, riding in from the fields. When he learns what it's all about, Opanas flops on the

ground before the squire, kissing his boots.

"Dear sir," he entreats, "why flog this fellow when I am only too willing to marry Oxana without any urging!"

See, Opanas was willing to marry Oxana—a good sort he was, I swear!

Roman cheered up, got to his feet and pulled tight the drawer strings around him.

"Well and good, man, but why hadn't ye come along before? And the squire's no better. Why not take the trouble to ask if there be a willing man? But no! Instead he grabs me and beats the life out of me. Is that acting like a Christian?

Pooh!"

Roman was a fellow that could even tell the squire off. Ay, ay! Once he was enraged no one, nor the squire either, could get on the right side of him. But the squire was a wily one—in this whole business he had something at the back of his mind—and so he ordered Roman to be put down flat on the grass again.

"I do it for your own good, you fool," he cries, "and you're turning your nose up. You live lonely like a bear, and the lodge is a cheerless place.... Flog him, the fool, till

he screams he's had enough.... As to you, Opanas, get the hell away from here! This is a repast you've not been invited to share! There's no room for you at the table—unless it's the treat Roman is getting that you're hankering for."

By now Roman was real rageful. Ay, ay! The blows fell thick and fast 'cause folk in those days knew how to give a flogging. Roman stood the whipping for a long time. He would not say "Enough!" But in the end he gave in.

"It's not fair for a Christian to be flogged like that," he said, "all because of a wench, and the blows not even counted. Enough! May your arms wither away, you flunkeys of the devil. Ye've been taught well how to use the whips! Am I a sheaf of corn that you should thrash me so? If that's how it is, I agree to the marriage."

"Good!" says the squire, well pleased. "And with the flogging you've had—though you'll find it hard to sit, you'll do all the more dancing at the wedding!"

The squire was merry, that he was, but what befell him afterwards I would not wish upon any Christian, nor Jew either! That's what I think....

Well, that was how Roman got married. He brought his young bride to the lodge. At the beginning he kept chiding her and blaming her for the lashing he got.

"You're not worth it," he would say, "for a man to be flogged like I was for your sake!"

And soon as he comes from the woods he drives her out of the lodge.

"Be gone! I want no woman in the lodge! Get out and stay out! I won't have a woman sleeping here, for I can't stand the smell of one."

After a while a change came over him. Oxana would sweep the floor, whitewash the walls and set out the crockery all pretty. Everything was soon shining, a joy to look at! Roman could see that she was a good woman, and bit by bit he grew used to her. Nay, more than that, son, he took her unto his heart. And that's the Lord's truth. That was the turn things took for Roman. So, after he got to know his woman well, he says:

"Thanks to the squire for doing me a good turn. I was a fool to have taken that flogging. I see it now there was no evil but e'en good in what was wanted of me!"

After some time went by—I wouldn' know how long 'twas—Oxana laid down on a bench and started moaning. By evening she seemed to be real bad. Waking next morning I heard a low whimperin' and thought to myself—a baby has been born. Sure enough there was a baby.

But the little baby did not live long in this wide world, not longer than from morn till evening. The whimpering stopped.... Oxana took to weeping bitterly, and Roman says to her:

"The baby's gone, and soon as it's gone there is no call to fetch the priest. We'll bury the little one under the pine."

That's the way Roman spoke, and more than that, it was just what he did. He dug a little grave and buried the child. See that old tree stump there, charred by lightning? That's what be left of the pine under which Roman buried the little one. And what I'll tell you, son, is that to this day soon as the sun sets and the evening star rises in the sky over the forest, a birdie can be seen fly in' and twitterin' over the grave squeakin' so sad that it breaks the heart. That's the wee unbaptised soul that's beggin' for a cross to be put on the grave. Men that know and are book-learned say that if a

cross is put up, the soul will not fly over it any more.... But we who live in the woods are ignorant. The soul goes on flyin' and complainin'. All we can say is—"Go away, poor soul, we can't do anything for you!" It starts weepin' and flies off, but then flies back again. I can't tell you, son, how sorry I am for that poor soul!

Oxana got well again, and she'd go to the little grave, and sit by it, and weep so loud that the forest shook with her sobs. She took the baby's death very much to heart, but Roman did not, he was only sorry for Oxana. He would come from the woods, stop in front of Oxana, and say:

"Stop crying, foolish woman. What's there to cry about? We can have a second, if the first died, and a better one. For all I know the dead child was not mine. That's what folk said. And when another comes, I'll know I'm the father."

Oxana hated such talk. She would stop crying and get to yapping bad words at him. But Roman was not angry with her.

He'd only ask: "What are you yapping at me like that for? I said I did not know and nothing more. I knew nothing about you before our marriage, only that you did not live in the woods, but in the wide world,

among people. So how am I to judge? Now you do live in the woods. That's good. But let me tell you that when I went to fetch the old midwife Fedosya from the village, she said to me: 'Look, Roman, hasn't that baby come too soon?' 'How am I to know if a baby comes too soon or not?' I asked her. But you had better stop hollering 'cause I can lose my temper and give you a good beating."

After scolding Roman some more Oxana would stop.

Sometimes she bawled him out or hit him on his back, but when Roman's own anger was up she grew quiet—she was afraid. She'd cuddle to him, put her arms around him, give him a kiss and look into his eyes. Roman'd be sure to soften. 'Cause, son, you might not know it, but I who am an old man, though I've never been wed, have seen a thing or two. And let me tell you that a young wench's kisses are sweet enough to soften the surliest man. Oh! I know what these wenches are like! And Oxana was a buxom wench, such as you won't find nowadays. The wenches now, I tell you, are not what they used to be in my day.

One day a trumpet sounded in the forest. Tra-ta, tara-tata-ta it went ringing, real merry 'twas. I knew not what it meant, for I was just a mite. I saw the birds flushing from their nests, a hare run for his life with ears laid back, and me thinks—'tis some strange beast a-hollerin'. But 'twas no beast, 'twas the squire come riding his mount—and blowing his trumpet. Behind him rode his huntsmen, with dogs on leashes. In his blue tunic Opanas Shvidki rode right back of the squire. Opanas was sure the handsomest of the men. He wore a hat with a gold-embroidered crown. His horse frisked, his gun gleamed behind his back, and slung over the shoulder was his bandore. The squire had a soft spot for Opanas, 'cause he played the bandore well, and was a master, too, at singing songs. Opanas was a fair lad too. The squire was nothing to him in looks. He was bald, his nose was red, and though he, too, had a merry twinkle, 'twas nothing like the sparkle in Opanas's eyes. Opanas would give me a look—and I wanted to laugh, though no maid was I, mind ye, just a laddie. Twas said that Opanas's fathers and grandfathers were Zaporozhye Cossacks who belonged to the free Sech.

These Cossacks be all handsome, slick and dashing fellows. Just think, son, 'tis one thing to dart across the plains with a lance, and another to fell trees with an axe....

I ran out of doors. Just then the squire drew up at our lodge together with his men. Roman came out to welcome the squire. He held the stirrup as the squire dismounted and greeted him.

"Hope you're well!" said the squire.

"I'm sure well, thank you. Why shouldn't I be well?" replied Roman. "And what about yourself?"

Roman was not one to make up to the squire. The men laughed at his words, and the squire joined in.

"Thank goodness, you're well," said the squire. "And, pray, where is the missis?"

"Where she ought to be! In the house, of course."

"We'll go inside then," decided the squire, and turning to his men commanded: "Lay a carpet on the grass, and get out the refreshments and drinks, for we want to wish the young couple happiness."

And now the squire, Opanas Shvidki, and. Roman, who was hatless, went into

the house. Bogdan, the squire's head huntsman and most trusted servant, followed behind. Bogdan was a servant the like of which you will not find nowadays. He was an old man, strict with the menials under him, but crawled on his belly like a dog before the squire. The squire was all he had in the world. It was said that when Bogdan's father and mother died he wanted to get married and asked the squire to allow him to farm a plot, but the old squire would not hear of it. He made Bogdan man-nurse to the young master who'd be to him, he said, father, and mother, and wife, all in one. Twas Bogdan then that reared and cared for the present squire when he was a little boy. From Bogdan the squire first learned to ride a horse and to shoot. When the young master grew up he became the squire of the manor. Old Bogdan followed him around like a cur. To tell the truth, many were the curses heaped by the people on Bogdan for his severity and many were the tears shed because of him. He did the squire's bidding and took no pity on anyone.... At a word from the squire could he do away with his own father.

The little lad that I was, out of curiosity, I slipped in after them into the house.

I now saw the squire standing in the middle of the room, stroking his moustaches and chuckling. Roman was right there, too, shuffling from one foot to another, crumpling his cap in his hands. Opanas stood a bit apart, leaning with his shoulder against the wall. He had a dark and frowning look, poor fellow, like that young oak in the storm now brewing.

The three of them turned to Oxana. Bogdan alone had dropped down on a bench in a corner and sat there, with head hung, a-waiting the squire's biddin'. Oxana drew away into a corner at the stove, lowered her eyes, and turned as red as that poppy growin' twixt the barley. She sensed misfortune, knowin' that she would be the cause of it. Let me tell you, son, that when three men have their eye on one wench, no good will come of it. There'll be a fight, if not worse. I know it well, for I have seen it happen.

The squire laughed: "Well Roman, my fellow, did I get you a good enough wife?"

"I'd say she's as good a wench as any," Roman replied.

Opanas glanced at Oxana and muttered under his breath.

"Yea, quite a wench! But too bad 'tis a fool that got her for a wife!"

Roman heard what he said and turned to face him.

"Pray, Opanas sir, why do you take me for a fool, I'd like to know."

"I take you for one," Opanas retorted, '"cause you're not smart enough to protect your wife."

See what Opanas hinted at? The squire stamped his foot in anger. Bogdan shook his head. Roman thought a while, lifted his head, and glanced at the squire.

"What need be there to protect her?" he asked Opanas without taking his eyes off the squire's face. "Except for the beasts, she's got nothing to fear. Tis only our gracious squire that comes our way now and then. Against whom then must I protect my wife? Don't ye go taunting me, ye devil of a Cossack, or I'll catch ye by that forelock of yours."

The two men would have come to blows. But the squire stopped 'em. He stamped his foot and they fell silent.

"Keep your mouths shut, you rascals," he cried. "We hadn't come all the way here

to start a fight. We came to wish the young people happiness, and to shoot grouse in the marshes. Come on out!"

The squire turned on his heels and walked outdoors. His huntsmen had a spread of refreshments ready under a tree. Bogdan followed the squire out of the house and Opanas stopped Roman in the entry for a word with him.

"Now, don't ye be mad at me, brother," said the Cossack Opanas. "But listen to what I have to say to you. You saw me beg the squire on my knees and kiss his boots so that he would give me Oxana to wed. Well, let's forget that. You were wed by the priest and so it must be. But I'd hate to see that cruel devil of a squire make sport of both of ye again. None can know of the sadness in my heart.... I'd rather put a bullet through her and him, and see them lie in the damp earth, than bed together."

"Ye haven't gone out of your mind, Cossack, have ye?" Roman asked.

I did not catch what Opanas replied, for they both spoke in a low voice, but I saw Roman give the other a friendly slap on the shoulder.

"What evil and cunning folk walk the earth!" remarked Roman. "Living in the

woods as I do, Opanas, I know nothing of such goings on. And you, squire, are playing a dangerous game!..."

"Now get you along," said Opanas to him, "and take care not to give away that you know anything, above all to Bogdan. That cur is sly enough to outsmart you any time. And see you don't drink too much of the squire's liquor. If he decides to stay behind and sends you off with his men, take them as far as the old oak-tree, show them the round-about way and tell them you will take the short-cut—and return as fast as you can."

"Good!" said Roman. "And if I go, I won't load my gun with small shot but with the buck-shots we use for hunting the bear."

When Roman and Opanas came out, the squire had already made himself comfortable on the carpet. He asked for the wine-flask and drinking cup into which he poured out some brandy and handed it to Roman. It was a dandy flask and drinking cup that the squire had and the brandy was even better. You downed one cup and your heart glowed, you downed a second, and your heart frisked in your breast, and if a man was not accustomed he would be sprawling under the bench

after a third when there was no woman to get him into bed.

Oh, I tell ye, the squire was a wily one! He wanted to get Roman dead drunk but there was no such brandy as could do that to Roman. Roman drained one cup filled by the squire, another and then a third. But it only made his eyes gleam dangerous like a wolf's, and his moustaches twitch.

The squire grew angry.

"Look at the bastard! He swills brandy without batting an eyelid. Another one with that much brandy in him would have been weeping a long time ago. And this one, my good folk—why, he's laughing!"

This devil of a squire knew full well that once a drunken man got to the point of weeping he would drop his head on the table soon. But this time he had the wrong man!

"And why, pray, should I be weeping?" asked Roman. "Surely that would not be a proper thing to do—to bawl like a woman when my gracious squire comes to wish me happiness! Thank the Lord, I have nothing to shed tears about, let my enemies shed tears...."

"Does that mean you're well pleased?" asked the squire.

"So I am. Why should I be displeased?"

"Have you forgotten how we urged you into marriage with a whip?"

"I couldn't forget that! But I tell ye I was a fool then. I knew not what was bitter and what sweet. The whip was bitter and I liked it better than the woman. But now I must thank you, sir, for teaching a fool to know the sweetness of honey."

"Very well," replied the squire. "Then it's your turn to do me a service. Guide my men to the marshland to shoot plenty of game—and don't fail to bring some woodcock."

"When do you want us to start out?"

"After a couple of more drinks, and when Opanas sings for us. Then off you go!"

Roman looked at the squire and said:

"It'll be tough going. The day's on the wane. It's a long ride to the marshland, and with the way the wind's whistling there's sure to be a storm. Small chance we have of shooting a watchful bird like the woodcock."

By now the squire was tipsy himself, and at such a time his temper was quick to rise. He heard his men say in an undertone —"Roman is right about the storm coming

on"— and flew into a rage. He brought his drinking cup down angrily, raised his eyes and all fell silent.

Opanas alone did not get frightened. He came forward with his bandore and while tuning it said with a sidelong glance at the squire:

"Surely, sir, you won't act against your better judgment and send the men to shoot grouse into the storm at so late an hour?"

He was bold right enough! Of course, the others were in fear of the squire—they were his chattels. But Opanas was a free man, him being of Cossack descent. He was brought to these parts by an old Cossack bandore player from the town of Uman in the Ukraine. The folk there, son, had been rioting. And the Cossack's eyes were gouged out, his ears slashed off and he was sent to wander in the wide world. The boy Opanas was his guide. And thus they went from one town and village to another, until one day they showed up at the manor of the old squire. The old squire was fond of songs, and he let them remain in his household. When the bandore player died, Opanas was kept on the manor. He pleased the new lord. And he stood from

Opanas a boldness for which he'd flay another's skin.

Now, too, at first what Opanas said angered the squire and it seemed like he would hit him, but he only said:

"You're a smart enough fellow, Opanas, to see that if you stick your nose into an open door you're likely to get it slammed...."

Opanas was quick to guess his meaning. He answered him in the words of his song. Oh, and if the squire was quick enough to catch the meaning of the song, the lady of the manor would not be shedding bitter tears over him some hours later.

"Much obliged for the warning," said Opanas, "and now hearken to my song, will you?"

Opanas struck a few chords on his bandore.

He then raised his head and looked into the sky. There an eagle soared and the wind tossed about the dark clouds. He heard, too, the murmur of the pines.

Once again he struck a few chords.

You've missed much, son, 'cause you never heard Opanas Shvidki play, for there is no one who can play like him. The bandore is no special instrument but it

wants a skilled hand to make it talk. And Opanas had but to pass his fingers over the strings for the bandore to tell many things—like the soughin' of the pine forest in stormy weather, the wind rustlin' through the underbush in the plains and the withered weeds whisperin' over the high Cossack graves.

Son, you'll never hear such playing! All kinds of people travel to Polesye nowadays. They've been all over the Ukraine—in Chigirin, Poltava, Kiev and Cherkassy. They tell us that the bandore players are gone for good, not heard any longer at the fairs and marketplaces. I have an old bandore hanging idly on the wall of my hut. It was Opanas who taught me to play it, but no one cares to learn from me. When I die—and it'll be soon—the song of the bandore, I tell you, will die with me.

Opanas began to chant his song softly. His voice was not very strong but so taking that it went right to the heart. And the song, to be sure, was one he had composed himself for the squire. I never heard it again, and when afterwards I would ask Opanas to sing it, he refused.

"The man for whom this song was made up," he said, "is not longer in this world."

In his song the Cossack Opanas told the squire what was in store for him. The squire fell to weeping, tears trickled from his moustaches, and yet not a word of the song did he truly understand.

"Ah, there is nothing but a bit of the song that I remember."

The Cossack sang about the squire, the squire Ivan:

Oh pan, oh Ivan!
Wise pan knows a *lot—*
He knows the hawk that flies on high
Lills the crows up in the sky.
Oh pan, *oh Ivan!*
Has the pan *forgot:*
It happens sometimes, like as not,
A nesting crow can beat a hawk....

Even as I speak now, son, I hear the song and see the people—the Cossack Opanas standin' with the bandore, the squire seated on the carpet with hung head and weepin', the huntsmen crowdin' around, pokin' each other with their elbows; and old Bogdan waggin' his

head.... And the forest murmurs, as it does today, the bandore rings soft and sad, Opanas sings of the lady of the manor weeping over the squire, over Ivan:

Pani weeps *and sighs,*
While over pan *Ivan a black raven cries.*

Alas, the squire missed the meaning of the song, dried his tears, and said:

"Get going, Roman! Lads, mount your horses! You, Opanas, go along with them. I've had enough of your songs! This was a good one, but ne'er what you sang will come about."

The heart of Opanas softened from the song and his eyes were sorrowful.

"Squire, sir," he said, "old folks in our parts say there is truth in a tale, and there is truth in a song, save that in a tale the truth is like iron grown rusty for 'tis long passed around the world from hand to hand, while in a song it is like gold, proof against rust. That is what the old and wise say!"

The squire brushed his words aside.

"That may be so where you come from, but not in these parts. Be off with you, Opanas, I've had enough of your chatter!"

Opanas lingered about a minute longer, and then all of a sudden dropped on his knees before the squire.

"Look, squire, get on your horse and ride back to your lady. I have a forebodin' of evil."

The squire grew so angry at these words that he kicked the young Cossack as he would a dog.

"Get out of my sight! You're no better than a woman! Get away before you catch it from me!" He then turned to his men:

"What are you standing there for like that, you swine? Am I your lord or not? I'll do to you what my fathers have not done to yours!..."

Opanas rose from the ground, dark as a thundercloud. He exchanged a look with Roman who stood apart from the rest, leaning calmly on his rifle, as though nothing had happened.

Suddenly he smashed his bandore against a tree, and it broke into smithereens and let out a pitiful moan that rang out all through the forest.

"Let the devils in the other world knock sense into a man who refuses to listen to reason!" he said. "I can see, squire, that you have no need of a loyal servant."

Before the squire could reply, Opanas jumped into his saddle and rode off. The other men, too, mounted their horses. Roman threw his gun on his shoulder and shouted to Oxana before he left.

"It's time to put the laddie to bed, Oxana. And make the bed for the squire, too."

When everybody rode away—going down that road over there—the squire went into the lodge. There was only his horse standing tethered under a tree. It was growing dark, blustery, and beginning to rain, just the way it is now.... Oxana put me to bed in the hayloft and made the sign of the cross over me for the night.... And then I heard her sobs.

I was too small to understand what was happening around me. I curled up in the hay, listened for a while to the hum of the storm, and started to doze off.

But just then I heard a man walking near the lodge. He went to the tree and untethered the squire's horse. It snorted, stamped its hoofs, and galloped off into the

woods. Soon the sound of its steps died away. Then I heard another horse come down the road, this time to the lodge. The rider jumped down from the saddle and rushed to the window.

"Squire, sir, open the door, quick!" It was old Bogdan's voice. "That rascal of a Cossack is up to some wickedness. He's let your horse out into the woods."

Before Bogdan finished he was seized from behind. Then there was a thud that frightened me.

Now out of the door dashed the squire rifle in hand. But Roman had him in his grip before he left the entry, seizing him by the forelock and throwing him down on the ground....

The squire saw things looked bad for him and pleaded:

"Let me go, Roman boy, surely you remember the good I did to you?"

"I remember, you devil's own squire, the good you did to me and my wife, and I shall repay you for it...."

Opanas was there with Roman, and the squire now turned to him.

"You speak up for me! You said you were my loyal servant, and I loved you as a son."

"Loyal servant, you say? You've driven me away like a dog! You've loved me the way a rod loves the flogged man's back and now you love me the way that back loves the rod! You have not heeded my words when I pleaded with you and entreated you a while ago...."

And now the squire called to Oxana.

"Oxana, you have a kind heart, you speak up for me!"

Oxana came running out of the lodge and cried out desperately:

"Sir, did not I ask you and beg you to spare me, and not to disgrace a married woman? But you cared not. Now you beg me to do something for you. Oh, misery! I know not what to do!"

"Let me go!" cried the squire. "For this all of you will rot in Siberia...."

"You needn't worry about that, sir," Opanas retorted. "Roman will be at the marshland before the others get there, see? As to me, thanks to you, I'm all alone and care little for myself, so that I can go away into the woods with my rifle, gather a jolly band, and lead a merry life. We'll go out on the highway, and once we're in the village we'll make our way directly to the

manor house." He now addressed Roman. "Let's carry the squire out into the rain."

And so they did, the squire screamin' and kickin', Roman growlin' like a bear and the Cossack Opanas mockin' the squire.

I was so frightened that I ran to the lodge to be with Oxana. She was sitting on a bench looking as white as a sheet.

The thunderstorm now blew full blast, the forest wailin', the wind howlin' and the thunder crashin'. As I sat on the bench beside Oxana a moaning came from the woods. It was so plaintive that to this day I cannot recall it without a shudder—though it goes many years back.

"Oxana, dear heart," I asked, "who can it be moaning like that in the woods?"

She cradled me in her arms, and rocked me, saying:

"Sleep, sonny, 'tis only the forest murmurs...."

And indeed the forest murmured, murmured louder than ever.

'Twas for another little while we sat. Then I thought I heard a rifle-shot in the woods.

"Oxana, dear heart," says I, "who may that be shooting out of a rifle in the woods?"

The poor thing went on rocking me and repeating:

"Hush, ye laddie, 'tis only the thunder!"

She couldn't stop crying, and she went on pressing me close to her heart, and saying: "The forest murmurs, the forest murmurs, laddie...."

And so I fell asleep in her arms.

Next morning, when I woke up, the sun was shining. Oxana was asleep with her clothes on. It seemed to me that I had dreamed the happenings of the night before.

But I had not dreamed them, not at all. They had happened. When I went out of the house and ran into the woods the birds were a-twitter and the morning dew glistened on the leaves. I came to a bush and there lay two corpses side by side—of the squire and Bogdan. The squire's face was pale and calm, while the head huntsman, grey as a dove, looked stern, as he did in life. And I saw blood on the chest of both.

.....

"What befell the others?" I asked when the grandfather dropped his head and fell silent.

"Ay, ay! Things turned out just as Opanas said they would. He himself lived long in the woods raidin' the highways and the manor houses with his fellows. As his father before him, it was his Cossack destiny to become a Haydamak. Time and again he dropped into this very lodge—and, mind ye, most often when Roman was away. He'd set for a while, sing a song, and play the bandore, too. But whenever he came with his fellows, Roman and Oxana always made him welcome. However, there was more than that to his visits. When Maxim and Zakhar are here, take a good look at them. I've never dropped a hint to them, but folks as knew Roman and Opanas will tell at once which resembles the one and which the other, though they be grandsons and not sons of them.... Such are the things that I remember happenin' in our pine forest.

"See how loud the forest murmurs—there is sure to be a storm."

III

It was on a weary note that the old man finished his tale. His excitement seemed all spent, fatigue possessed him, he stumbled over his words, his head shook and his eyes teared.

Evening's dark shadows had descended upon the forest and the earth below. The forest around the lodge tossed about like a violent sea; the frowning treetops rocking like the crests of waves in gusty weather.

The dogs' loud barking announced the arrival of their masters. Both forest rangers hurried towards the lodge, and close on their heels, to complete our company, came Motria with the missing cow.

A few minutes later we were seated inside the hut. A fire crackled merrily in the stove, and Motria was getting our supper ready.

Though I had seen Zakhar and Maxim many times before I now eyed them with keen interest. Zakhar was swarthy of face, with brows meeting beneath a low bulging forehead; his eyes had a sullen look though the face bespoke a good humour that goes

with robust strength. Maxim's grey eyes, on the other hand, were frank, with a tender light in them; he was in the habit of giving a toss of his curly hair and his laughter was amazingly infectious.

"I bet you've been listening to the old tale about our grandfather," said Maxim.

"So I have!" I replied.

"That's the old man talking again! Old memories come back to him when the forest murmurs loudest. These memories are sure to keep him awake most of the night."

"He's like a child!" Motria remarked as she ladled cabbage soup into the old man's plate.

The old man seemed not to understand that he was the subject of conversation. He indeed now had a senile look; he smiled in a silly way, nodding his head; but his face showed genuine alarm and he listened apprehensively whenever a fresh gust of boisterous wind buffeted the lodge.

It soon grew still in the forest hut. The dying flame of the wick in the crock cast a faint flicker, and the only sound to be heard was a cricket's chirping. But outside the forest stirred with the rumbling of a thousand voices joined in forceful but

suppressed clamour, holding grim discourse in the darkness. It was as though a conference was in progress at which a sinister power rallied forces to strike with concerted strength at the puny little lodge in this nook of the woods. At times the hollow rumbling grew in force and intensity. And then the door trembled—as if with an angry hissing someone was bearing upon it with his weight from the outside—and the night wind's shrill and plaintive whistling in the chimney brought a pang to the heart. But when the wild gusts of wind subsided for a while, an even more ominous silence set in before the storm resumed its bluster. It was as though the pines were conspiring to uproot themselves from their native ground, and drift off to some unknown clime upon the fluttering wings of the storm.

I dozed off for a few minutes, but not for long. The wind howled in a pandemonium of sound. At moments the flame in the crock flared bright, lighting up the lodge. The old man sat on his bench fumbling to reach a familiar hand. The expression on the poor old man's face bespoke fright and almost childish helplessness.

"Oxana, dear heart," I heard him mutter plaintively, "who's that moaning in the woods?"

He went on groping for someone in the dark and listened.

"Ay, ay!" he muttered again, "there's no one moanin'. It's only the rumblin' of the storm, only that, and the forest is murmuring...."

Another few minutes went by. And then blue flashes of lightning streaked across the small windows of the lodge outlining the trees in a phantom light—only to be dissolved in the darkness amidst the fretful rumbling of the storm. A blinding flash followed, obscuring for a moment the feeble shivery flame in the crock, and a thunderclap burst through the woods.

The old man again fidgeted on his bench.

"Oxana, dear heart, who may that be shooting in the woods?"

"Sleep, Grandfather, sleep!" came Motria's kind voice from the bunk on the stove. "There he goes again calling Oxana, for it's a stormy night. And he does not remember her being long dead! Oh! Oh my!"

Motria suppressed a yawn, said her prayers, and once again the lodge lapsed into silence—broken only by the rumbling of the forest and the old man's fearful mumblings:

"The forest murmurs, the forest murmurs... Oxana, dear heart!"

Shortly the rain burst into heavy torrents, their tumult deafened the buffeting of the wind and the moans of the pine forest....

1886

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

THE RIVER PLAYS

Sketches from a Travel Diary

I

For some time after I awoke, I could not quite grasp where I was.

Overhead spread the blue sky; a silvery cloud was drifting languidly across it and melting away. Tossing my head back a little, I could see high above a dark wooden church which glanced down innocently at me from behind a clump of trees on a hilltop. A few yards away, on my right, stood an unfamiliar-looking hut, on my left—a drab, graceless pole, with a wide plank shelter, an alms cup nailed to it, and a board on which was written:

Give alms, passer-by,

for the Lord's bell.

At my very feet splashed the tide.

It was the splashing that awakened me from my sweet slumber. It had long been poking into my consciousness with its disturbing whisper, like a loving but at the same time relentless voice rousing one at dawn to begin the day's inevitable labours. And one is so reluctant to rise....

I shut my eyes again, so that lying still I could account to myself how I came to be here at all, beneath the wide sky, on the banks of the splashing river, a stone's throw from that hut and that pole with its unembellished appeal to the passers-by.

Bit by bit I was able to reconstruct the preceding events. Thus all of the previous day I had spent on the shore of the Holy Lake, in the whereabouts of the submerged, as legend had it, invisible town of Kitezh, milling around with the crowds there, listening to the twangy singing of blind beggars, pausing before makeshift altars under spreading trees, where *bespopovtsi* and breakaway monks and nuns of every persuasion chanted their own masses, while in other parts of the lake's shore, religious arguments waxed

hot in dense knots of people. I spent the whole night long on my feet, squeezed in among the teeming crowd in front of the old chapel. I remembered the fatigued faces of a missionary and two priests, the books piled up on the lectern, the flames of the tallow candles by which the debaters traced texts in the heavy folios to back up their arguments, the flushed faces of the schismatists and the church conformists who met with much vociferation every sound objection to their views. There came back to me, too, the old chapel, with the yellow lights flickering in front of the icons seen through its open doors, and the bright moon sailing gently across the dark sky above the chapel and the shadowy, whispering trees. With difficulty I elbowed out of the crowd at dawn, coming into the open, weary, dispirited by the futility of the scholastic arguments, disheartened and disappointed. Following in the wake of the departing pietists, I dragged myself along the field paths in the direction of the blue strip of forest on the banks of the Vetluga. I was carrying away with me the most wearisome impressions from the shores of the Holy Lake, and the invisible town, to which the populace was so

hypnotically drawn. It seemed to me that I had spent that sleepless night in a suffocating tomb by dim and fading lamplight, listening to a chant from behind the wall, recited in a droning voice, a prayer mourning the irrevocable dormancy of popular thought.

The sun had already risen above the woods and waters of the Vetluga when, after walking about fifteen versts along forest paths, I reached the river bank. And there and then I dropped on the sand, overcome by fatigue and by the dour impressions I carried away from the shore of the lake.

With these latter behind me now, I gladly shook off the remains of my drowsiness and sat up on my bed of sand.

II

The river's friendly murmur did me a good turn indeed. Three hours before when I settled down for a nap on the beach —and a wait for a Vetluga steamboat to pick me up—the water was at low ebb, its edge marked by an old overturned boat;

but now on waking I found the boat being washed and rocked by the tide. The river was a rushing and frothing mass, splashing practically at my feet. Thus in another half hour—had I been more soundly asleep—I might have found myself wrestling with the water, not unlike the capsized boat.

It looked like the Vetluga was on a rampage. There had been heavy rain during the last few days; torrents rolled from the depths of the woods; the river swelled and flooded its gay, verdant banks. Swift streamlets now chased one another, pushing, spinning ahead, twirling into eddies and untwirling, and again rushing headlong, the whole river transformed into racing and hurtling whorls of cream-coloured froth. At the edge of the water, the burdock, caught up by the tide, struggled to get free, the unsubmerged tops swaying tremulously above the water. But where the river was deeper, the same burdock and colt's foot, indeed the entire brotherhood of fern and plant, seemed resigned to their fate, while osier saplings with their green overhanging twigs shuddered at every surge of the water.

On the opposite bank the broom, young oak growth and the white willow were gaily tousled. Behind them dusky firs traced a serrated line, and farther still towered the black poplars and stately pines. Stacks of planks, freshly-cut logs and house frames gleamed white in one spot of the banks. A little distance away the top of a sunken landing-stage jutted from the water.... This entire placid landscape seemed to come alive before my eyes, impregnated now with the swish, splash and gurgle of the agitated river. There in the deep stream splashed the playful eddies; the waves tinkled as they beat upon the sides of the decrepit boat. The entire river vibrated with the perpetual bursting of fluffy whorls of froth, or "bloom", as they term it here on the banks of the Vetluga.

I felt I had seen all this long before; it seemed so near and dear, so poignantly familiar: the river with its curly banks, the unassuming little church on the hilltop, the hut, and the plea to give alms for the "Lord's bell" looking down at me from the pole in a diffident scribble....

It had all happened long before,

But when I remember not....

A poet's lines came to mind.

III

"Eh, man, I saw the river creep up on ye as I be passing home. On my way back me thinks—bet the river's got at him. You be sleeping sound, good man!"

The speaker is a man in his middle years. He is sitting on a bench in front of the hut; the sounds of his speech, too, are oddly familiar and pleasant. He has a deep chest voice, slightly hoarse as from a bad hangover, but with notes in it just as simple and guileless as are the little church, the road post and the inscription on it.

"Look ye at the river! It's wild ... trouble's a-coming, mark ye!"

This is Tyulin, the ferryman—he sits there crestfallen in front of the hut, with a sunken look about his whole figure. He wears a grimy cotton shirt and dark-blue homespun breeches, his bare feet slipped into worn-out boots. The face is rather

youthful, with no beard or moustache to speak of, the features expressive, with a pronounced Vetluga fold around the lips, but now wearing the frown of a good-natured man who is oppressed in spirit.

"My boat'll be carried off," he remarks listlessly but knowingly. "Sure thing!"

"You had better get it ashore," I reply, limbering up.

"Yea, I had. But now? Look what's doing! Tis rough!"

The boat shudders, rears, performs a convulsive movement and falls back helplessly into its former position.

"Tyu-yu-yu-li-in!" The call comes from the opposite bank. Where the timber lies, at the crossing, looms the tiny figure of a horse and a small man who has come down to the very edge of the water. He is waving his arms frantically and calling out in the thinnest of falsetto voices:

"Tyu-yu-li-in!"

Tyulin continues to eye his boat with the same gloomy look and gives a shake of his head.

"See, she's risin' again. Yesterday the ferry-landing was clear of the water. But there's no tellin' what the night'll bring. The river's up to its pranks and when it

starts playin', brother, you better watch out!"

'Tyu-yu-yu-li-in! You devil!" The call comes and fades away again, without producing the least effect on Tyulin, as though the desperate summons is as much part of the river as the playful rippling, the rustling of the trees, and the murmur of the frothing water.

"You're being called!" I say to Tyulin.

"So I am!" he replies indifferently, and in the same philosophical tone as when he spoke of the boat and the river's pranks. "Ivanko, eh, Ivanko! Ivanko-o-o!" he calls.

Ivanko, a flaxen-haired boy of about ten, who is digging for worms on a hillside pays as much heed to his father as the latter did to the man on the opposite bank.

In the meantime a woman with a child in her arms is making her way down the steep path from the church. Swaddled in rags to the top of its head, the child screams shrilly. Another child—a little girl of about five—clings to the woman's skirts. The woman looks angry and worried. At the sight of her Tyulin grows more sullen and grave.

"There's a woman comin'," he says, turning his head away.

"Well?" says the woman harshly, going right up to Tyulin, and eyeing him with scorn. It is quite obvious that a long-standing feud exists between these two—the carefree Tyulin and the careworn, tired woman with her two children.

"Well what? What d'ye want?" Tyulin asks.

"What do I want? Get that boat ready! If there was any other way to cross the river, d'ye think I be stoppin' and talkin' to a bungler like ye?"

"Ain't we proud today! Shooting our mouth off...."

"Why shouldn't I? Look at the sot! Our men ought 'ave kicked ye out of the ferry trade long ago, a good-for-nothing drunkard like ye! Get the boat, d'ye hear me?"

"The boat? The laddie here'll get you across.... Ivanko, d'ye hear me? Ivanko-o!... He'll catch it from me, the scamp! I need a good rod. I say, traveller...."

Tyulin turns to me.

"Come ye, get me a good rod!"

And with a lurching effort he makes believe that he is going to get up. Whereupon, in the twinkling of an eye,

Ivanko darts off to the boat and catches hold of the oars.

"Charge the woman two kopecks, nothing for the little girl," Tyulin listlessly gives his order and again turns to me.

"My head's splittin', something awful."

"Tyu-yu-lin!" the wailing is repeated from across the river. "Get the raft!"

"Dad, eh Dad, he's shouting for the raft," Ivanko calls, evidently with the hope of being released from the job of ferrying the woman across.

"I hear him, he's been shouting long enough," Tyulin replies imperturbably. "Talk it over with him. See if he really means to go. Maybe he doesn't.... What's making my head split like that?" he addresses himself to me again. His tone is most appealing and trustful.

The reason is obvious enough: the poor devil reeks of alcohol, and I can smell it at a distance of a few yards, the fumes like a pungent spray mingling with the odour of the river and the green brushwood of the banks.

"It'd be different if I had a drink," says Tyulin musingly, "but I had none."

His head drops even lower on his chest.

"Haven't been drinking a long time ... only had a drop yesterday."

And he plunges into thought.

"Supposin' it had been more than a drop ... did have quite a bit yesterday, but nothin' today!"

"You're probably having a hangover," I mildly suggest.

After a long and grave stare, Tyulin seems ready to concede the point.

"That may be so," he says. "Today I had no more than a drop."

Slowly but surely, if in a tortuous way, Tyulin is getting at the true reason for his discomfort. But in the meantime the man on the opposite bank has almost completely lost his voice.

Hardly audible above the agitated swishing of the river comes the cry—"Tyu-yu-yu...."

"It might be as you say," Tyulin goes on. "I suppose, man, you're right there, for I do swill it!"

IV

The man's hopeless call from across the river is no longer heard. Leaving behind on

the other bank his horse and cart, he is now crossing to our side with the boy Ivanko to have it out with Tyulin. But to my astonishment he greets Tyulin most good-naturedly and sits down beside him on the bench. The newcomer is a considerably older man, with a grey beard and blue eyes, faded like Tyulin's, wears a high felt hat, and his lips, too, curl into the typical Vetluga fold.

"You're in a bad way, eh?" he asks Tyulin with a wry smile.

"My head, man, is just splitting in two. And why?"

"Cut down on your brandy."

"Maybe brandy is the reason. The traveller here says so, too."

"Why don't you get your boat away? It'll be carried off."

"Looks like it'll be carried off."

Both men stare for a while at the boat which is tossing about as in the throes of agony.

"Come now, get the raft, I've got to be going."

"Sure you want to go? To Krasikha I suppose? To get drank there?"

"Well, you've had your fill already...."

"I did, and my head's bad. And you—maybe you'll change your mind about going?"

"You goof! My daughter's married there. We're invited. My wife's with me."

"Well, that settles it. If your woman's with you, go we must. But I've no poles."

"What! Talking daft, are you? What are those?"

"They're too short. Look at the current! The poles need be fifteen feet long."

"Why haven't you brought the long ones, when you saw how wild the river was getting, you goof?... Ivanko! Run along, boy, and get the poles."

"You had better go yourself," Tyulin says, "they're too heavy for the boy."

"You go—that's your job!"

"But *you* wants to get across, not me!"

Both men, and Ivanko, too, do not budge.

Tyulin, as once before, makes believe that he's going to get up, and shouts: "I'll give it to him, the scamp, wait till I get a rod." Then he turns to me, "Stranger, get me a good rod!"

With a loud screech, Ivanko takes himself off and runs up the hill to the village.

"He's not big enough!" says the man.

"The poles are heavy!" Tyulin agrees.

"Run up and help him!" the man suggests, as he sees Ivanko struggling with the poles on top of the hillock.

"Just what I meant to tell you to do!"

Both go on sitting and gaping at the boy.

Just then a woman's shrewish voice comes from the other side of the river: "Evstignei! You devil!"

"My wife's calling," says the man Evstignei uneasily.

With the woman that far, Tyulin preserves his calm.

"The gelding might break loose," says Evstignei, "and he'll hurt 'em."

"Frisky, is he?"

"Bet he is!"

"He might and no mistake ... why don't ye turn back? What's the hurry?"

"What a chump you are! Can't you see it's along with my woman I've set off, so how can I turn back?"

Ivanko, his legs buckling under him, finally drags the poles over and drops them down on the ground with a wild sob. The last hitch removed, Tyulin has got to do his job.

"Say, stranger!" He seems to be favourably disposed towards me. "Look ye, come along—better join us—the river's gettin' wild."

We board the creaking raft, Tyulin being the last to get on; he hesitates for a few seconds, perhaps tempted to stay behind and leave us to our own resources. But in the end he comes on, splashing through the water. And then, casting a deeply mournful look at the pickets to which the mooring ropes are hitched, says in meek reproach, addressing no one in particular:

"The ropes! Why didn't one of ye unhitch them?"

"But you were the last to come," I remonstrate. "Why didn't you unhitch them?"

He makes no answer, perhaps thus acknowledging the justice of my reproof, and just as listlessly, with the same dismal melancholy, lowers himself into the water to unhitch the ropes.

The raft creaks, lurches, and is afloat. The next moment, as though by a magic hand, the ferryman's hut, the upturned boat and the church atop the hill, are being swiftly removed from us, while the spit on the opposite bank with the green

willow, lapped by the river, is racing to meet us. Tyulin shoots a glance at the fast-moving bank, scratches his mop of hair, and eases his weight on the pole.

"We're goin' fast."

"We are," replies Evstignei, straining his right shoulder to put more pressure on the pole.

"Mighty fast."

"What are ye standin' for and not pushin' off?"

"Try and push off! Can't strike bottom on the left."

"Is that so?"

"That's so!"

Evstignei gives his pole a fierce poke that almost sends him splashing into the water. Neither does his pole reach to the bottom. He pauses and says bitterly:

"You're a scoundrel, Tyulin!"

"Mind your tongue! You're no better!"

"What d'ye think you're being paid for, you knave?"

"Go on, shoot your mouth off!"

"Why don't you keep long poles?"

"I keep 'em."

"Where are they?"

"At home ... did ye expect the boy to drag fifteen-feet-long poles for you?"

"You're a mean rascal all right."

"Got more to say? Gab if ye like!"

Tyulin's composure seems to pacify the indignant Evstignei, and removing his hat he scratches his head.

"Where are we off to?" he asks. "All the way to Kozmodemyansk?"

V

Indeed, the swift current, as though mocking and laughing at our raft, is driving the cumbersome structure farther downstream. Bursting and bubbling, the white caps overtake us. The little spot of land with the willow tree quickly rushes by before our glance. We leave far behind the house frame of fresh timber, the little cart, and the woman who is shouting and waving to us from the shore.

"We're in a bad way, in a bad way," says Evstignei dejectedly, eyeing his woman.

We are, indeed, in a fix. Even with the whole length of the pole plunged into the water, it fails to strike the river bottom.

Ignoring Evstignei's lamentations, Tyulin surveys the river around him

gravely. He knows that his share of the peril will be greatest, for it will be his job to pull the raft all the way back against the current. And he has now visibly taken himself in hand; his glance has grown more sober and steady.

"Steer to the middle, Ivanko!" he orders.

This time the boy is quick to obey.

"Sit down and paddle," he tells Evstignei.

"Are you sure you've got oars?" asks the other doubtfully.

"So—you're going to gab!"

Tyulin's words are emphatic enough to make Evstignei get down from the platform unprotestingly and take up the oars which prove to be lying on the planking.

"Stranger, get ye down on the other side."

I get into position to row on the right side, just as Evstignei does on the left. We now have a full "crew" at work. His face having completely lost its former expression of snotty unconcern, Ivanko looks at his father with alert and sparkling eyes. Tyulin pokes the pole into the river and says encouragingly to the boy: "Hold on, Ivanko, and keep a sharp eye!" My

offer to replace the boy at the steering oar is utterly ignored by Tyulin. Obviously the father and son know they can rely on each other.

The raft begins to lurch and with a sudden thrust Tyulin strikes the river bottom in a shallow spot. The griphold he has gained enables him to push off about sixty feet.

"Steer against the current, Ivanko! Quick!" Tyulin commands gruffly, putting the weight of his shoulder against the knob of the pole.

Meanwhile, bracing himself with his feet, Ivanko yanks the steering oar upon himself. The raft veers, but as it does, the oar flies into the air and Ivanko is thrown back on the planking. The raft "lists". A second later Ivanko is back in his place, eyeing his father fearfully.

"Fasten the oar!" his father orders.

Ivanko binds the oar with a bit of rope. And the raft is finally on the "crossing course". We ply the oars. With one powerful prod, Tyulin pushes the raft across the current. We are promptly aware of the relaxed pressure of the water, and are going upstream.

Ivanko's eyes sparkle with glee, and Evstignei regards Tyulin with unconcealed admiration.

"Eh, man, be it not for the brandy," he remarks with a wag of his head, "ye'd be wroth your weight in gold. The brandy dulls your wits."

But the light has gone out of Tyulin's eyes, and he goes all slack again.

"Keep paddling, stranger, dip them in, don't sleep!" he says listlessly. And he himself now pokes the pole sporadically, limply, with his former look of grim apathy. By the way the raft is moving along we can tell how inconsiderable is the support our oars get from his pole. The critical moment when Tyulin rose to the height of his ferryman's talent has passed and now, with the danger over, the spark kindled in him has died out again.

We plod upstream for about two hours. But if Tyulin had not availed himself of the advantage of that last shoal, the raft might well have been swept away and set adrift in the swift-flowing current with no hope of rescue for at least two days. There being no possibility of pulling in to the bank in the usual place—the landing-stage was long ago flooded—Tyulin steers towards a

steep loamy bank and ties the moorings to a willow's trunk. Evstignei and I now help to get the cart down on the raft, with Tyulin looking on idly, and the woman who long ago ran out of her stock of invective, now sits motionless in the cart, like one petrified, and avoids looking in our direction as if the very sight of us were an abomination to her. It is as though she has become frozen in her virulent contempt of menfolk— "good-for-nothings", one and all —and does not even take the trouble to get down from the cart with her child.

The horse is afraid to go down, lays back its ears and rears.

"Come on, give it the whip, the frisky one," Tyulin counsels.

The nervy horse pulls in its rear and jumps on the raft. There is a violent crash and clatter lasting for about a minute, as though the whole structure has collapsed right through the earth. With a bang, a creak and a crash—the animal almost slipping into the water after it has broken the flimsy railing—the cart is finally lodged on the shaky, quaking raft.

"Broken, ain't it?" Tyulin asks Evstignei, who is examining the cart apprehensively.

"Nay," replies the other in joyful astonishment.

The woman goes on sitting like a carved image.

Tyulin, too, is surprised. "Is that so? I was sure it would get broke."

"Could well. See how steep 'tis here."

"Sure is, and why it didn't break beats me.... Say, none's unhitched the ropes again," Tyulin utters with the same melancholy air as before and steps listlessly ashore to attend to the ropes. He calls to me: "Start paddling, stranger, don't go to sleep!"

After a half hour of strenuous padding and many shouts of encouragement and instruction we finally approach the bank we left. Perspiration is streaming from me, from the unaccustomed strain.

Seeing this, Evstignei suggests half-jokingly, "Tyulin owes you a drink, stranger."

But Tyulin does not take it as a joke. Many years spent on the banks of the desolate river, and perpetual brooding over the cause of his debilitating hangovers, apparently instilled in him a serious attitude to things. He stares long at me with his lacklustre eyes until a

gleam of thought flickers up in them and he remarks cordially:

"We'll pull in—and you'll get it.... And mind you it'll be more than one drink," he adds confidentially in a lower voice. And if not pleasure, surely a momentary relief from his heavy hangover, lights up his face.

Two waggons are skidding down the rough hillside road.

"There again!" Tyulin says ruefully.

"They may not really mean to cross," I comfort him, "perhaps they have no important business."

My irony, or any irony, is lost on Tyulin, possibly because he has his own kind of humour, unsophisticated and spontaneous. He seems to share it with the curlyleafed, guileless birches, the gnarled old willows, the playful river, the wooden little church on the hilltop, the lettering on the post, and with the whole of the unaffected Vetluga landscape, beaming upon me with its enchantingly simple, as though long familiar, smile.

In any event, Tyulin makes an earnest reply to my jesting remark:

"If they've no loads, they'll wait! How can I ferry them with my head splittin'?"

VI

The steam-boat keeps me waiting. I am told that its whistle can be heard an hour before it is due, when it ties up at one of the landing-stages higher up on the river. But when I come back to the bank three hours later, having wandered through the village and had my tea, there is still no news of the steam-boat. The river continues to play with a growing violence. Wading knee-deep in water, Tyulin lazily splashes his way through the flooded grass to his hut. He is drenched to the skin, his wide breeches stick to his shanks and impede his progress. Trailing behind him, on a tie-rope, is the old boat. True to his expectations, it has indeed been carried away by the current, and now retrieved.

"How are you keeping, Tyulin?"

"I'm all right. Not too strong though. Come, let's go across."

"What for?"

"There's trouble there. Looks to me the river'll carry away Ivakhin's timber-rafts."

"Pray, what's that got to do with you?"

"Just look! There's Ivakhin draggin' a quart o' spirits. But what's a quart! He

won't grudge even a halfpail—things lookin' that bad."

A man of about forty-five, dressed in the local merchants' garb, with a shrewd and shifting glance, comes from the direction of the village and is obviously in a flurry. The wind blows open the flap of his coat, and he is carrying a bottle of vodka. As he draws up in front of us, he speaks directly to Tyulin.

"Swelling, eh?"

"Pretty bad, can't ye see?"

"Reached my rafts yet?"

"They be in water, but not afloat yet. My boat's been carried off, just caught 'er at a run behind the copse."

"Is that so?"

"See, I'm wet to the skin."

"Mighty bad," says the merchant angrily and slaps his thigh with his free hand. "Afore ye know it my rafts'll be off in the river. It'll go hard with me! Hard!" Then he addresses himself to me, "The men down here are all knaves."

"No call to yap at Christian men," says Tyulin standing up for his own. "There was a contract, I bet."

"There was!"

"To bring the timber to the sandbar?"

"To the sandbar."

"And the timber is there and no other place, isn't it?"

"Rascals, that's what you are! Can't ye see the sandbar will be under the water in no time?"

"So it will, by morning there won't be a sign of it."

"See? And those rascals find nothin' better to do than bawl their songs. Hollering and not minding the loss I'll suffer."

They fell silent—from across the river, on the bank where the new house frame stood, came the rowdy singing of the crew. Ivakhin, who was a petty lumber merchant, had contracted. The day before, when paying up, he cheated them out of some twenty rubles. And now that the swift-flowing river seemed to have taken up their cause and given them an upper hand over the merchant, it was he who had to humbly beg them to work, while they could afford to swagger instead of standing before him cap in hand.

"Not for a hundred rubles! We'll teach you how to treat a contracting crew!"

The river had gone on swelling! Ivakhin had flinched, rushed off to the village,

quickly procured a quart vodka bottle and bowed to the will of the crew. He made no terms, did not say a word about the rafts, but kept bowing and pleading with the crew to forget bad feeling and do him the favour of drinking his "free treat".

"Stop hedging, you so-and-so," said the men. "You won't have your way!"

"Not for a hundred rubles will we fish them out of the water!"

"Let the river sport and play to her heart's content!"

"Let it toss your timber about—serves you right."

But they drank up the vodka all the same and struck up a song. Their voices came strident and wild from the opposite shore, mingling with the splash and splutter of the raging river.

"They sing proud!" remarked Tyulin with grudging admiration.

Ivakhin was obviously less pleased with the song. He listened uneasily with a troubled and wretched look in his eyes. There was a fierce and threatening note in the song that boded no good.

"How much did you shortpay them yesterday?" Tyulin asked bluntly.

The other scratched his head, and still looking uneasily at the bank from where the rowdy singing came, replied with the same bluntness:

"We differed over twenty rubles."

"Quite a bit! See they don't thrash your sides for you!"

Ivakhin's face showed that he did not at all think that unlikely.

"If only they would drag the rafts out," he said wistfully.

"They'll do that," Tyulin reassured him.

"Talk to them," said the merchant coaxingly. "Tell them the worst is over and by nightfall the tide will turn."

Tyulin did not reply at once; his glance was glued to the bottle, he paused and asked yearningly:

"Fetching them another quart?"

"I am!"

"You'll bring a third, too! Do we row across?"

"We do!"

The crew noticed the boat when it was midway across the river. Whereupon their singing grew louder and more rowdy, glancing off from the green wall of forest, where the rafted timber lay. In a few minutes, however, the singing ceased; it

gave way to a clamour, just as loud and rowdy. Soon Ivakhin was shooting back to our bank and as quickly darting off to the other side with a fresh supply of vodka. His face bore a scowl, but his eyes had a gleam of hope.

At sundown the crew set to rolling the logs up, and now to the strains of the doleful *Song of the Boatmen* were lugging the timber ashore and hauling it up the bank slopes by hand. Soon it lay stacked on the top of the steep bank out of reach of the turbulent river.

Presently the singing started again. The drenched and tired crew were sharing their last big bottle. Perspiring, scowling, yet more than pleased, the merchant Ivakhin made his last trip to our side of the river and hurried away in the direction of the village; the wind ruffled the flaps of his coat, and his hands gripped two oversized empty bottles.

More sullen than ever, Tyulin followed him with his gaze.

"Did they beat him up?" I asked.

Shifting his gaze to me, he asked:

"Whom?"

"Ivakhin, of course!"

"No, why should they beat him?"

I gave Tyulin a surprised look, and then my mind suddenly took in what happened, for his face was swollen and he had what definitely looked like a brand-new shiner.

"Tyulin, my dear fellow!"

"What is it?"

"How did you get that black eye?"

"Can't say really."

"I dare say, Tyulin, you were beaten up!"

"And who would be beating me up?"

"The crew."

Tyulin looked straight at me and said thoughtfully:

"That may be so.... But they didn't beat me up too hard."

After a pause Tyulin shot me a questioning glance.

"Could be Parfen I caught a blow from?"

"It may well have been him," I help him again to a slow realisation of the truth.

"It be Parfen, I'd say. There's an evil fellow that's full of spite against folk...."

Thus was the matter cleared up, except that I keenly desired to know what had so unexpectedly diverted the fury of the crew from the merchant Ivakhin to the utterly neutral Tyulin. But just then someone again began calling from the opposite bank.

"Ty-yu-yuli-in!"

Without so much as turning his head, Tyulin lazily shuffled off in the direction of the hut, saying to me as he went:

"What about you taking a good run across?"

But something made him prick up his ears. He turned to look and revived. On the opposite bank, the russet shirts of the lumbermen flickered in the twilight. The men were calling to Tyulin and motioning to him most temptingly with their arms.

"They be calling me?" he exclaimed happily, and looked questioningly at me.

"They certainly are! They might want to give you another beating."

"Not on your life! Wrong you be, they want to treat me, to make it up...."

With amazing alacrity Tyulin now dashed off to the edge of the water. He tied together for some reason two boats, stern to prow, got into the first, and pushed off quickly leaving boatless this side of the bank.

VII

I realised that this was a bit of strategy on his part, when I caught in the twilight the creaking sound of a cart coming down the hillside. Slowly the cart advanced to the bank. The horse snorted and laid back its ears, bewildered no doubt at the change that had come over the placid Vetluga.

The figure of a man detached itself from the cart. Walking up to the water's edge, the man looked around, scratched his head, and spoke to me:

"Where's the ferryman?"

"Over there...." I pointed to a bright chip already midway across the river's dark surface.

He peered into the darkness, shook his head, and after listening for a while to the singing, started backing the cart away.

"A rascal he be, the ferryman," he said rather indulgently. "And he's taken the boats, too. Nothin' will get him back, we're stuck for the night."

After he had led away the horse, he came up and greeted me.

"Passing through here?"

"Yes."

"From the lake?"

"That's right."

"Quite a bit of folk going there. There will be more tomorrow.... Oh my, how the river's rearing. Awful, it is! Supposing you and I try to work the raft? No, we won't manage.... I'll have to spend the night here. Is it the steam-boat you're waiting for?"

"Yes, the steam-boat."

"Don't expect it before dawn. You, too, will have to spend the night here." He installed the cart behind the hut and set free the hobbled horse on the slope of the bank. In a matter of minutes smoke was curling from behind the hut.

Tyulin had trained his customers to be patient.

The sun had long dipped behind the hills and woods, and a shadowy, balmy and quiet dusk settled upon the Vetluga. Our little bonfire flamed merrily, the smoke rising in a straight line. And the stillness of the night contrasted strangely with the rush and turbulence of the swelling river. The singing continued to be heard from across the river; at times I thought I caught Tyulin's voice among the general clamour. The lights of a little neighbouring village came on one after another on a hill. In the daylight I had not noticed the

village; its drab houses and dark roofs had blended with the rest of the landscape. But now it stood out in a flattering spangle of lights against the sombre hilltop, with here and there the quadrangles of its roofs etched against the dark sky.

It was the village of Solovyikha. To idle away the time, my new friend told me a few rather curious particulars about its inhabitants. They were enterprising and proud folk; their neighbours considered them thieves, one and all. My new friend now told of the time he had stopped in the village of Blagoveshchenye, staying at the home of the church sexton. This was on a winter evening. And as they were sitting at the table, there came a repeated rap-rap on the window. When the sexton looked out he saw standing under the window an old man, a neighbour of his, who asked to be put up for the night. "But you've no more than a verst to go home!"

"True enough, but I have to pass Solovyikha and am afeared of the ice-hole."

It appeared that a strange sort of relationship had sprung up between this oldster and the people living in Solovyikha. Whenever the old chap came into some

money he got good and drunk and took to bragging: he had in his pocket, he would say, no less than a 100-ruble bill. The Solovyikha braves would lay in wait for him as he went home, grab him when he reached the river and drag him to one of the ice-holes.

Did he want to be thrown into the ice-hole? Not at all! Well then he would have to part with his 100-ruble bill. And so he did. But again he was asked if he wanted to be thrown into the ice-hole. No, he did not.

"Then don't tell a soul about it!" He said he would not. "Will you swear to it?"

"May I drop dead on the spot, if I tell a single soul!" And he did keep mum. He was thus waylaid several times. Finally he wearied of the game and started to avoid passing Solovyikha by night, especially when drunk. He let it be known that the villagers took him to the ice-hole, but he would name no names.

This story made me regard Solovyikha with a new interest. Where—I thought—but on the banks of the Vetluga could one come across such utter lack of sophistication, innocent wile, and trusting natures ready to believe that one could

"drop dead on the spot" if one went back on his word. My new friend, who himself lived on the Vetluga, assured me there was no other village like it. Now in Maryino three years ago—counterfeit notes were about. But that was quite a different matter—otherwise you could go away for a night and day, leave your home unlocked with money in it, and on returning find none of it missing. "What about Solovyikha folk?"

"I dare say, that's their way."

Where else—it struck me again—would one find such tolerance of neighbours' ways? Blinking cordially and ingenuously at me, the lights of Solovyikha seemed to answer: "Nowhere, nowhere"....

"Tyulin has his ways, too," I remarked smiling. "True! The downright rascal he is. A curse on him! And yet he knows his business! When autumn comes around, or spring, he'll prove himself. At high-water he can manage the raft as nobody else can. That's why he's kept on the job."

"May we join you?"

"You're welcome!"

Two men with staffs and bast-bags over their shoulders approached. One of them,

as he dropped down his bag, looked intently at me.

"Have we seen you before?" he asked. "I wouldn't be surprised," I said. "Were you at the Holy Lake?"

"I was."

"I suppose that's where we saw you. Did your fervour bring you, or have you taken a vow in our Lady's name?"

"My fervour. And you?"

"For the holiday Mass, and to visit our kinsfolk."

"I see—come and sit by the fire."

"We were hoping to cross the river. My home is not far, and I could reach it by morning."

"Cross the river, indeed!" broke in my latest acquaintance. "Tyulin's carried off the last boat. Could we try the raft though?"

"Nay, the river's too wild for that!"

"And there be no long poles."

The other newcomer walked with a weary step to the river's edge.

"Tyu-yu-li-in! The boat!" he called loud and long.

Across the river rolled the sounds, as though caught up by the swift current. The playful stream seemed to be carrying them

aloft, tossing them from side to side betwixt the dark slumbering banks. Their reverberations drifted off into the night, dying away softly, pensively and in sooth sadly, so sadly that the man, as he heard it, dared not again to stir the distant echoes of the night.

"Nothing doing!" he said giving up and returning to the fire.

"And the man lives close enough," spoke my acquaintance again. "About four versts away—in Pesochnaya. Have you heard any stories about the folk of Pesochnaya?" he inquired, smiling archly.

"No, I've never been in these parts before."

"Well, they have their own trait. Every city has its customs, and every village its ways. The folk at Solovyikha, as I've told you, like loot, but Pesochnaya folk are good at keeping what is theirs. 'Twas about five years back that seven men from Pesochnaya went to the village of Blagoveshchenye to mend implements there—ploughshares, scythes, sickles and such like. On the way, back, they stopped at the river bank, each loaded with his bag of iron. The river was just as wild and prankish as it be today—and with a wind,

to boot, stirring up the waves. A boat was not safe in such water. 'Eh, fellows,' says one of the smiths, 'what if the boat is overturned? Our iron might sink. But if we tie the bags to our bodies, it'll be safe.' Everybody thought this a good idea. So before gettin' into the boat they tied the bags to themselves. Midway across the river, the boat filled with water and overturned. The iron, as was well tied to their backs, was not lost. It stuck to its owners—and all seven of them sank along with it. Well, man, would you say I thought it all up, eh?"

The man from Pesochnaya offered no objection. In the firelight my companions' three faces revealed the same bantering smile and the characteristic Vetluga fold, vividly recalling Tyulin to me.

"Where do you come from?" I asked the older of the two men, the one who had seen me on the shore of the Holy Lake.

"I am a rootless and homeless man, sir, once a soldier."

"But you're a native of the Vetluga, I believe?"

"Yes, of the river. Done quite a bit of fishing here in my early years, and 'ave been knocking about here, too, after my

army service for more than fourteen years now."

There was little of the soldier in this elderly man, save perhaps for a certain assured manner of speech and an old grimy cap with faded piping and a big-sized frayed visor. From under the visor sparkled a pair of grey eyes and a barely perceptible smile played under the moustache. He had a very pleasant, low voice with a vibrancy in it that betrayed a one-time dashing songster, but it had grown considerably gruffer owing perhaps to old age, the river dampness, or—as likely as not—to too much drink. Whatever the case, it gave me extreme pleasure to listen to that voice with its touch of humour and see the old soldier's teasing Vetluga smile. And I now remembered that I had indeed run into him on the lake. In the heat of a fiery controversy on the subject—"with a thief and a robber, and all the more with a heretic, have nothing to do"—in which each side released upon the other a spate of passages from the Bible and set a multitude of dogmatic pitfalls, this old soldier with the frayed visor and sparkling eyes, suddenly emerged in the middle of the discourse and spoiled

everything by relating a simple story from life instead of citing texts. The moral of the story produced a strong impression on most of the people, but was treated with deliberate contempt by the dogmatists. Be as it may, the debate fell through, and the crowd dispersed, carrying away with it quite a few newly-risen doubts.

"But, pray, that's just women's babble, vulgar talk," remarked one of the dogmatists to me resentfully. "Couldn't be in the Bible, could it?"

'That was Efim, wasn't it?" asked another who arrived towards the end of the debate.

"It was him."

"An empty fellow from the Vetluga, used to be a labourer of ours. He is not versed in Scripture, only read the Gospel." The speaker thus dismissed him.

Efim gave his characteristic smile, and whether it referred to the subject under discussion, the listeners or perhaps to his own self, the empty, homeless ex-soldier, it was hard to say. Whatever the case, I thought then that I saw more live sense in the story of this man from the Vetluga than in all the other talk on the lake.

Presently our conversation turned on the same topic again. We spoke of such centres of piety as Lyunda, Svetloyar and Kitezh, also about the people of Urenevsk. Among the many dissenting religious groups, assembling at Svetloyar, each with their own books, hymns and creed, the Urenevsk pietists stood out most markedly. Every year they set up their altar under the same old oak-tree, on a hillslope. At a time when the Austrian minister who wore a surplice and had long side braids fronting the ears, could attract no more than an audience of ten, a sizable crowd invariably gathered around the Urenevsk oak-tree. I was struck by the stern and haughty faces of the Urenevsk pietists. Among them were women in dark convent garb, a long and lanky, sharp-featured fellow, a pock-marked young beggar, and an unkempt God's fool. They read and sang in turn in twangy, monotonous voices, and seemed to be utterly oblivious to the world. Unlike the exponents of other religious sects who willingly fell into argument, the Urenevsk preachers put on superior scornful airs, and did not deign to answer questions. They seemed to have reached a stage

where they found nothing worthy of their leniency; their own islet dominated by its small group of shorn priests and resounding with their doleful refrains was to them the essence of all holiness.

"They hold themselves far too superior," said Efim. "They're sound and sober—no denying that. But they make folk like us feel uneasy."

"Why is that?"

"Their faith is so dull—ours is much jollier," the owner of the cart answered before Efim did.

At these words the man from Pesochnaya, who had kept aloof, smiled gaily.

"I been with them," he said, "they're funny folk."

"How?"

"Just like that. In the winter I hired out to them— to cart timber from the wood. The young master and me comes home at night in my own sledge. In the morning I wakes up. It's still dark, it being winter. I sees the old woman of the house light a candle 'cause she be wantin' to pray to the icons. The icons were solid, painted ones. Well, thinks I, before I go and tend to my horse, I better do a little praying, too.

Softly I gets down from the bunk under the ceiling, stands behind her and starts crossing meself. Just then she turns around, sees me, starts a-flapping her arms: 'What may you be doing?' she asks. 'What indeed! I mean to do some praying.' 'Wait!' says she. 'Why wait? It's just the time!' 'No,' she says to me, 'you do it later.' So be it, I thinks, and climbs back up on my bunk. She finished praying, put out the candle and took it away. And soon after that I sees her old man get off his bunk on the stove, go to the icon stand with his own icon, and light his own candle. Down I comes. Now I can pray, too, thinks I. But just as I be bringing it up to my forehead to make the sign of the cross, the old fellow grabs my hand. 'What are you up to?' 'I was just goin' to pray!' 'Wait, it won't do!' How d'ye like that! It looked like again I'd have to go back. Let's see what happens next, thinks I. And next 'twas the young master and his wife that comes down from their sleeping place and lights a candle in the side-room. They brings a crucifix, but no icon. I joins them quickly, aimin' to cross myself. I now reckon I could pray to a crucifix."

"What, they, too, wouldn't let you?" asked one of the more curious listeners when the speaker paused.

"No, they wouldn't, I'll have you know! After they says their prayers, they calls me. Now I am free to say mine, they says. But I find nothing to pray to; they took away the crucifix. Well, I reckon, you can go and choke yourselves. What do I want with your heathen doings? I would get on my way—and pray to the Lord's own sun."

"Three faiths under one roof!" exclaimed the old soldier in amazement.

"To be sure, three! At dinner-time they says pray, sit down and eat with us; all as it should be. But the old couple and their daughter set themselves apart from the young master and me. And again they gives him and me separate bowls. I now lost my temper. 'Let alone me, you be shunning one of your own,' I says. 'We do shun him,' replies the old woman, 'for he goes out into Russia hobnobbing with your kind, eating with sullied folk....' That's what they thinks of us, see!"

"Y-yes!" agreed the cart owner, who now lay on the ground with his arms folded under his head. "They be proud and strict, and yet they can be shameless, too. There

are two brothers of that faith living not far from our village. When one of them be called up to the army, the other took his wife for himself, and that wife being with child. When the soldier returned he took unto himself his wife's own sister. That's the way two brothers made two sisters their wives, and to the little boy that was born the soldier man be both uncle and father. They are not queasy about that." The speaker now yawned and suggested: "Perhaps we could snatch some sleep, eh?"

Silence fell briefly.

"Confusion is a-roaming in Russia!" broke in the simple-hearted voice of the man from Pesochnaya.

"It's been that a long time," said the old soldier lying down. "It didn't begin yesterday."

"'Course it's been long. There's also the Molokans...."

[A religious sect in Russia rejecting the official church, all its rites, and icons.]

"They're a very different kettle of fish. Go to sleep, don't throw your words about!"

But the "confusion" roaming through "holy Russia" weighed too heavily on his mind for the man to lie down just then. He sat, picking at the fire with a twig, and seeing that I, too, was awake, said with a knowing nod in Efim's direction:

"A 'kettle of fish', he says.... I should think so—he keeps company with them himself, won't pray to our gods, drinks milk on fast days. I saw it myself or I wouldn't talk...."

And now he, too, settled down to sleep on the sand.

VIII

I rose and looked around me.

Blue dusk shrouded the river; above it the moon was slow in rising, but the stars twinkled softly and musingly above the Vetluga. The banks lay in darkness, shadowy, mysterious, and they seemed to tune their ear to the ceaseless murmur of the swelling river. Nothing relieved the darkness of the river's surface, not even the froth; only here and there the shimmering reflections of the stars gave off a brief flicker, and were instantly swallowed up by the rushing current, or a frisky wavelet would leap onto the bank and dart towards us with a flick of foam like a little animal that whisks by you in a sportive humour.

Uproar had not ceased on the opposite bank, but the crew's singing was dying down—like our own fire which was no longer fed with twigs and branches. Voices were thinning; apparently the men were only too happy to doze off in the glade or brush. Now and again there rose a louder and bolder voice, but it failed to stir the others and keep the song alive.

I lay down beside my sleeping Vetluga companions and admired the beauty of the starlit sky, now beginning to bathe, too, in the golden glow of the moon rising from behind the hills. Creaking faintly, a late cart rumbled down the hillside. Newcomers were arriving, too, and after lingering for a while at the river's edge and vainly hallooing for the ferry, resignedly joined our little group which owed its forced delay to Tyulin's stratagem.

On the hilltop the village lights had gone out one by one, and the pole with the sign now loomed in the firelight, now vanished from view in the darkness.

From the other side of the river came a nightingale's trill.

.....

"Ferry-y!"
"Ferry-y, ferry, ferr-rry!"
"Ferryman, hurry up!"
"Halloo-oo-oo-oo!"

The cries rang loud, shrill, harsh and insistent—like a reveille at dawn. They woke me up and the rest of the encampment around our fire. They seemed

to pervade earth and sky, and were echoed in the peacefully slumbering creeks and coves of the Vetluga. The night travellers rubbed their eyes. The man from Pesochnaya, so abashed the night before by his own diffident cry across the sleeping river, now gave a frightened start, and asked:

"What's that, Christ Almighty! What's that?"

Day was breaking, mist mantled the river, our fire was dead. Strange groups of people loomed in the morning fog. Some were standing around us; others were near the river hallooing to the ferryman. A short distance away stood a cart to which was harnessed a sleek, well-fed horse, calmly waiting for the raft.

These new people I recognised at once as the folk from Urenevsk.... There were the women in their dark convent garb, whom I had seen two days ago, the tall, grim-faced fellow I noted, the pock-marked beggar-boy, the unkempt God's fool, and a few others of that group.

They stood around us staring brazenly and with open contempt at the sprawling figures that made up our camp. Recoiling a little in embarrassment, my companions

eyed the newcomers with an unwonted timidity. Somehow I recalled the English Puritans and the Independents of Cromwell's day. Most likely they had stared just as haughtily at the poor sinners of their country, who glanced back with the same abashed meekness.

"Say, you, Vetluga toads, where is your ferryman?"

"Ferry, ferry, ferr-rry!"

It was as though a whole army had invaded the ferryman's peaceful domain. Across the river rolled the booming cries of the Urenevsk folk. And the once again creamy frothing river seemed to be rushing away in cowering haste from the tumult and the cries which echoed far and long.

Would Tyulin hold out stoically against this onslaught, I wondered.

But I needed only to cast a glance at the river: there, to my surprise, loomed Tyulin's boat in the morning mist—already midway across to our side. This philosopher of a ferryman seemed, too, to have succumbed to the spell of the stern and haughty Urenevites and was now rowing back with all his might. His face as he came ashore bore the mark of dejection

and the usual hangover desolation, but that did not stop him from dashing hurriedly uphill to fetch the long poles.

Our camp was also stirred to action. Owners of the nightlong delayed carts led in the horses by their forelocks, and quickly put them in harness. Perhaps they hurried for fear that the Urenevsk folk might not wait for them and thus leave them once again at the mercy of the autocratic Tyulin.

A half-hour later the loaded raft cast off from the shore.

At the extinguished bonfire remained only Efim and myself; the old soldier rummaged in the ashes for an ember with which to light his short-stemmed pipe.

"Why didn't you go with the rest?" I inquired.

"There are folk there I've no liking for," he replied, puffing hard at his pipe. "I am not in a hurry, I'll walk through the dew. As for you it's time to get ready. Hear the steamboat coming down?"

Presently to my ears came the dull thud of the steamboat's wheels; in another quarter of an hour the ship's white flag loomed into view from behind a bend in the river, and then the *Nikolai* sailed

smoothly down the midstream, with lights blinking in the morning fog, and tugging at her side a fair-sized barge.

Obligingly the soldier rowed me to the steam boat in Tyulin's boat, and almost immediately emerged from behind the stern, heading for the opposite bank where the Urenevsk folk were disembarking from the heavy raft.

Sunlight gilded the tree-tops of the forests bordering the Vetluga banks, while I sat wide-awake on the upper deck and feasted my gaze on the ever new nooks of beauty which the enchanting river, still half-veiled in blue mists, revealed so lavishly at every bend.

And I thought: why had I been so heavy of heart on the lake shore, amidst the bookish public-speaking and "highbrow" muzhiks and pietists, and felt .so light and easy upon the quiet river with the headstrong, slipshod, wanton ferryman Tyulin perpetually suffering from his hangovers. Wherefrom was this feeling of burden and disappointment on the one hand and relief on the other? Why should I, a bookish man my self, feel oppressed by *them,* so cold and alien, and find the other so akin and familiar as though indeed—

It had all happened long before,
But when I remember not....

Dear Tyulin, dear gay, frolicsome, wayward river! Where and when had I set eyes on you before?

1891

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

AT-DAVAN

From Life in Siberia

I

"W-well! Of all the r-roads!" exclaimed Mikhailo Ivanovich Kopylenkov, my travelling companion. "The damnedest ice-track, the worst possible! Do I speak the truth or not?"

Sadly enough, Mikhailo Ivanovich spoke the undeniable truth. We were driving down the Lena. Across the full breadth of the river jutted in every direction huge ice hummocks which in the autumn the swift-flowing, infuriated river had disgorged in her battle against the bitter Siberian frost. At long last the frost scored victory. The river froze, and the formidable hummocks, a chaos of icebergs, piled up in disarray,

jammed in at the base, or tossed high up in some inexplicable way, remained a mute reminder of the titanic straggle; then, too, here and there gaped strips of never freezing water in which rushing sprays swirled and bubbled. Over these ice-holes hovered ponderous clouds of vapour as though indeed hot water gushed underneath.

Lording over this whimsical chaos of ice, on either side of the river, stood the mute and towering Lena Mountains. Sparsely growing larches clung with their spreading roots to the hillsides. But the rock would not let them grow and the slopes were strewn with fallen trees. At a close distance you could see the dead snow-powdered trees lying with their convulsively twisted roots just as they had been wrenched from the soil. But farther up the hillsides such particulars were blurred to view. The slopes near the summits lay mantled in a meshwork of fallen wood. The trees looked like hosts of pine needles as on the needle-matted ground of a pine grove. Among them rose the still living trees, the same erect, slender and pathetic larches, now testing their own chance of survival above the

corpses of their forbears. It was only on the hill-crests, flat as though the crowns had been sliced off, that the woods at once thickened into a dense forest stretching in a long band of mourning over the white slopes below.

And so for hundreds upon hundreds of versts. All week long the measly little speck of our sleigh had been bobbing in between the hummocks, like a skiff in a rough sea. All week long I had been gazing at the strip of pale sky overhead hemmed in between the black-rimmed snow slopes, at the gorge openings that mysteriously crept in from the Tungus wastes, at the cold mists drifting without end, entwining and unfolding, nestling in the clustering cliffs at the bends, and then being soundlessly drawn into the gorge openings, like a phantom army dispersing to its winter billets. There was a dismal stillness. Only at rare intervals was it broken by a sudden burst of moaning from the river. This was when the ice cracks—with the hiss of a flying cannon ball and an echo as loud as a cannon shot; the reverberations rolled back swiftly down the Lena's meandering course and took a long time to die out, frightening the

imagination with weird moans, suddenly breaking out in the distance.

I felt melancholy. My companion fretted and chafed. Our sleigh lurched and rocked from side to side and had already turned over several times; to the chagrin of Mikhailo Ivanovich it was invariably he who found himself underneath. It left him exceedingly disgruntled although it seemed natural enough for the weight to be greatest on his side. Were I to find myself underneath him, I would have been in grave danger, all the more so that Mikhailo Ivanovich took not the least trouble to lift himself up. He merely grunted and said matter-of-factly to the coachman:

"Get us up!"

This the coachman did, though it was a far from easy job, and we continued on our journey.

A month now seemed to separate me from Yakutsk, which we had left but six days before, and a whole lifetime to lie between me and the destination of my travels—Irkutsk which was more than two thousand versts away.

We made poor time, first held up by the bitter raging snowstorms, and now by

Mikhailo Ivanovich. The days were short, but the nights were quite light, with the full moon breaking through the frosty haze, and moreover the horses could be depended upon not to stray from the hard-beaten ice-track bounded off by the hummocks. But no sooner would we cover two or three stages than my companion, a beefy and flabby merchant, on arriving at the next station, would start throwing off his things in front of a fireplace or stove, derobing himself unceremoniously of what he needed and what he needed not to remove.

On such occasions I tried to protest: "Mikhailo Ivanovich, surely we could make yet another stage?"

"What's the hurry?" he retorted. "We need to drink some tea, and to catch some sleep, too."

Eating, drinking tea, and sleeping—all this Mikhailo Ivanovich could perform in inordinate proportions, with remarkable zest that reached almost to the point of reverence.

Besides, he had other considerations.

"The people around here," he would say with a mysterious air, "are terribly greedy

for money. They're a desperate lot—because gold has spoiled them."

"Oh, but gold is miles away, you don't even hear anything bad about these parts."

"Just wait till we're robbed; you'll hear plenty then, but it'll be too late. You're a funny bloke," he added working himself up. "Can't you see what these parts are like? That's not Russia for you! It's hill and dip, ice-trap and waste—a hell of a hole!"

And indeed Mikhailo Ivanovich entertained nothing but contempt and aversion for "these parts"; he ran down most captiously everything, from the gloomy landscape and people to the dumb beasts. The one allowance he made was that if you got a "break" you could get rich quick here ("in a day you could be made"). And it was just on the lookout for that "break", that he had been living in the region for quite a number of years, having set himself a certain "ceiling" which he hoped to attain and after which he planned to return to his "own" parts, somewhere around Tomsk. In this respect he reminded one of a man offered a certain reward if he dared run naked in a severe frost. Mikhailo Ivanovich agreed and now seemed to be racing, moaning and shivering, towards

the desired goal. His one thought was to get there, to grab the spoils—and then let the whole damned region go to the dogs, Mikhailo Ivanovich could not care less.

The impression was that at the moment he was well advanced towards his goal and perhaps for this reason was particularly on edge: what if somebody robbed him of the spoils? Mikhailo Ivanovich, about whose early career here I had heard many stories, and whose enterprising talents, bordering on audacity, were most glowingly commended to me, had now become as panicky as a woman. And owing to this, I was compelled to spend the most tedious evenings and long nights in these dismal posthouses on the banks of the desolate Lena River.

II

On one such frosty evening, I was awakened by a frightened exclamation from Mikhailo Ivanovich. It turned out that both of us had fallen asleep in our sleigh. And there we were on the ice with the rocky banks rising above us, utterly

forsaken, the bell not tinkling, the sleigh motionless, the horses and the coachman gone. Mikhailo Ivanovich was rubbing his eyes in fright and disbelief.

Our bewilderment, however, was soon dispelled. After peering hard at the even line of bank above our heads which receded in a long wall of cliff far into the distance and was bathed in the shimmering light of a full moon, I saw a little path that disappeared uphill in between the clefts in the rock, and directly overhead the high cross of a Yakut grave. It was not at all unusual in these regions to see a grave up on a river bank, even if it were a desolate spot, for the Yakuts were wont to choose high places for their burial grounds, close to bodies of water, with wide vistas and open space. And yet I recognised the spot: we had reached the At-Davan station which I had noted on my first journey on the river. There was the ruddy shale I had already seen, fancifully interlaced as though bearing some occult writing, the sheer unbelievably smooth bank, the sparse larches, the Yakut grave with the cross and blockhouse around it, and finally the grey trailing curtain of smoke softly overhanging the river from

the bank. At this point the track grew so narrow and the ascent was so steep that sleighs would be left behind on the ice for the new relays of horses to be brought directly to the frozen river. When he realised this, Mikhailo Ivanovich's mind, too, was set at ease, and the blinking lights over the footpath cheered him.

Before we knew it we had climbed the path and reached the posthouse of At-Davan.

It was warm as toast in the small quarters of the posthouse where a red-hot stove blazed with dry heat. In the light of two tallow candles, guttered in the heat, were revealed the tawdry surroundings of this half-Yakut structure converted into a posthouse. Pictures of generals and dazzling beauties alternated on the walls with postal notices and framed, fly-speckled charters. The place bore an air of expectation: preparations were afoot for important visitors that we could not ascribe to ourselves.

"It's just dandy here, old chap!" Mikhailo Ivanovich ejaculated gleefully, already busying himself with his saddle-bags which were bursting with provisions for the road. "It's marvellously warm. That

settles it, we'll stay the night!... Anybody there?" he called. "Get us a samovar and have water boiling for pelmeny!" [Siberian meat dumplings.— *Tr.*]

I tried to object: "Look here, Mikhailo Ivanovich, there's still time to go on to N.; we could spend the night there."

Just then I heard behind me a cackling, obsequious and rather frightened voice: "There are no horses to be had, sir."

I turned my head and saw a chubby little man of indeterminate age sidle into the room. He was dressed outlandishly in a skimpy frock-coat, checked drawers, pique vest, a shirt with fancy cuffs and old-fashioned trimming, as well as a bright necktie of a gold and green pattern. The outfit had a faded but genteel look, and seemed to have been put on specially for an occasion, was reminiscent of long bygone days. On his feet he wore the clumsy local felt boots, making his old suit of German cut look all the more ludicrous. Unaware of the strange figure he cut, the little man marched in foppishly with short mincing steps.

There was the same shoddy, faded and slightly crumpled look about the face and whole appearance of this man, though it

also seemed to have been primped and spruced up for the occasion. In the smile, grey eyes and tone of voice lurked a certain pretence to good breeding. The little man seemed to want to show that he had seen better days, knew the "civilities", and were he more favoured by circumstances could meet us on an equal footing. But for all that, he seemed to cower all the time as if he had all too often been snubbed, and feared similar treatment from us, too.

"Why do you say there are no horses?" I objected after taking a look in the ledger which seemed to have been put in a conspicuous place on purpose. "There should be two troikas available."

"That is so," he conceded humbly, "there *should be,* but... how can I explain it to you, sir...." he faltered. But then, lapsing into a plaintive tone, beseeched with great humility: "Have mercy, good sirs, and do not make your demands."

"Pray, why?" I asked surprised.

"You are one! Really!" Mikhailo Ivanovich, who had already managed to partially disrobe himself, broke in petulantly. "Why and why!" he mimicked. "What's your hurry? Is your house on fire?

Can't you see, man, we are being begged on bended knees, so there must be a reason."

"Quite true," said the other eagerly turning to Mikhailo Ivanovich with a beaming smile, and tugging at his coat tails, "quite true, without a reason for it I would never think of holding up travelling gentlemen. N-never!"

The last word he pronounced with dignity, squaring himself and giving his coat tails another tug.

"Very well!" I said resignedly as I realised the futility of trying to coax Mikhailo Ivanovich, who" went on quickly disrobing himself, out of the warm room and into the severe evening frost. "But surely you could give us the reason, if it's not a secret."

The little man's face broke up into smiles. He saw that he had gained his point, and seemed quite ready to favour me with a reply, when above the crackle of the fire there came the sound of a bell's tinkle from the direction of the river, and he started.

The door opened and the village Elder, a half-Yakut judging from his appearance,

walked in gingerly and shut the door tightly behind him.

"*Kelle (the* mail), Vassili Spiridonovich," he said.

"Oh, the mail!" echoed the little clerk with relief. "Well, *barantakh* (go), be quick about it!... Excuse me, gentlemen, I have to go, too...."

Off he went. The posthouse now became alive with movement. Doors slammed, steps creaked, the cabmen dragged portmanteaus and mail bags. Every time the door opened it brought to our ears the hurried tinkle of bells—horses were being led away to be harnessed on the frozen river. The cabmen yelled to one another in Yakut, but cursed in pure Russian thereby leaving no doubt as to their origin....

III

A few minutes later there burst into the room a man of short stature in a threadbare grey greatcoat, a Yakut fur hat and with a scarf wound round his throat. He tumbled in with such haste as though

he were being chased and made a beeline for the hot stove.

Slipping off his greatcoat, he remained standing in a flimsy fur coat of sorts that looked like a lady's jacket, and when he removed that, too, underneath was a postal employee's shabby uniform ripped at the armpits.

This was indeed the postman, running for his life from the frost which in the course of the long journey from the last posthouse must have scored off considerably against him. The miserable man was now peeling off all his chilled garments as though they were swarming with bees, and even before he removed the cap and the scarf he threw off the *valenki* and set them up with their soles to the stove. Taking off the cap and scarf was a longer business. Yakuts and half-Buryats, may it be known, avoided wearing beards or moustaches, ostensibly for reasons of beauty, but really owing to the harsh winters. The poor postman apparently took pride in these attributes of vanity, and now his scant little beard and just as scant moustache, which he might have used to charm a visiting marriageable young lady of well-to-do parents somewhere in

Kirensk, turned into one big icicle tightly joining his head with the cap and scarf. It was a long time before this postal official, who practically poked his head into the flames, and clawed with his frozen fingers at the icicle of beard and moustache, finally appeared before us in his true aspect: a young but considerably bloated face, restless yet lacklustre eyes, a dismayed and flustered look about the whole figure, a skimpy, too tight uniform and hareskin socks on his feet.

"Che!" he shook himself. *"Tymny bert, moroz ulakhan* (very cold, a great frost)!" he said in Yakut. "May I have a drink, gentlemen?"

"Help yourself!" Mikhailo Ivanovich replied genially. "You damn unlucky chap!"

Fright looked out from the young man's blinking eyes. The merchant's tepid sympathy recalled all the more painfully to him the rigours of the road, and the drink he gulped down did not warm him at all. This made him pour out another and sent it right down after the first. It was only then that the poor fellow's face lost some of its look of panic.

"It's a dog's life all right," he agreed. "And look how bitter the frosts are! Incredible!"

"Poor clothing you're wearing," said Mikhailo Ivanovich. "Not proper for the season."

"It's as good as you can expect. For eight rubles a month you can't do yourself proud...."

Once a week the mail-coach passed along this great big route. In the winter the three-thousand-verst journey is covered in nineteen days; in the summer it takes longer. In the autumn or spring, before the Lena is frozen or when boats are imperiled by the ice-floes, the mails are carried in saddle-bags on horseback. A whole caravan of heavily laden horses picks its way along the narrow path between the river and the mountains, now negotiating a dangerously jutting cliff, the horses wading belly-deep in the water, now scrambling up the rocky paths or appearing briefly somewhere on the mountain tops, right up in the clouds. It is difficult to imagine an occupation requiring greater hardihood, presence of mind, patience and robust health.... Three thousand versts! Nor do the cabmen have

an easy time of it! But they have long returned home for a respite, waiting for a rare fare to come along or for the next mails, while the postman jolts along in the saddle, is pitched and rocked by the violent waves of the vast river, or freezes huddling in between the leather cases in his sleigh. And that for the postman's meagre salary....

True, the postman invents ways of earning little extras. In Irkutsk he gets hold of a keg of cheap vodka which he sells to the posthouse clerks or cabmen, buys new calendars for the same purpose, or takes a batch of picture prints to peddle for a commission. Thus the many works of art that adorn the walls of the posthouses owe their presence in these remote regions to none other than the postman. He might be said to cultivate the aesthetic taste of the half-Yakut station masters with his pictures of beauty contest winners. He, too, promotes the popularity of generals, and he also dethrones them by replacing old idols with the latest ones. But his own wretched lot is little improved by the good he accomplishes, and if he manages to survive the rigours of the winter in his scanty apparel, this is to be ascribed

mainly and perhaps exclusively to vodka of which he drinks enormous quantities at every posthouse, and without any visible consequences. It is a good thing that he gets it cheap and that it is even a source of additional income to him—an innocent source under the circumstances, it must be said.

And again it is mainly he who carries the news of what goes on in the outside world along this sparsely inhabited three-thousand-verst tract of land.

It was just such a zealot of the postal services that now stood at the iron stove, with toes tucked under from the cold, hands extended to the flame, and cast hungry glances at our bottles.

"Is that cognac you have there? I'd like a drop," he proclaimed with diffident familiarity, darted to the table, poured and tossed off a drink and then returned hurriedly to the open fire with the same chilled and flustered look.

"Say, you mail fellow, what about joining us for tea," Mikhailo Ivanovich offered.

"Impossible, I am in too great a hurry, gentlemen." And he addressed himself to the clerk who entered at that moment. "Look, man, take care! He's on his way...."

The old clerk sighed.

"We're all in God's hands! If he'd only come sooner —we've waited long enough!"

"He'll be here any moment now! Got to be off before I bump into him. Though he'll catch up—hope it'll be on the track."

"What's it to you?"

"Just to avoid trouble if I can. D'ye know he got wind of the complaints?"

"So what?"

"Just that he's furious, they say. That's bad!"

"The Lord is merciful! We didn't complain...."

"Pray, whom are you talking about?"

"Arabin, the courier ... he's on his way back from Verkhoyansk!"

"I see! That's why you have no horses for us. So you feared we might take your last ones...."

"Quite right.... Judge for yourselves: he comes and I tell him there are no horses! And what then ... why, then he would stay overnight...."

Mikhailo Ivanovich broke into laughter.

"Oh I see, and in one night he'll gobble you up together with that fancy frockcoat of yours!"

The postman laughed, too, convulsively, with his head thrown back. More out of courtesy than anything else, the elderly clerk forced a smile, but there was a worried and anxious look in his eyes.

"God knows, God knows.... The good Lord preserved us the last time—and yet he managed to call me a swine."

"He did?"

"Yes, and considering that I used to be a civil servant of the tenth rank I could take offence. But in my present humble position I'm obliged to submit.... You've asked for a samovar?" he remembered suddenly. "Goodness, and I've kept you waiting. Just a moment, and you'll have it. We keep two samovars. In case Arabin arrives, there'll be one for him, too.... Just a moment....

IV

Presently a woman not yet past her bloom and still rather comely brought in a samovar and began setting up the tea things. At her entrance the postman again laughed in the same convulsive manner, but the old clerk seemed to have become

even graver. We invited the clerk and the postman to join us at the table. The latter refused, and just as quickly as he had shed them was now pulling on his half-dry clothes. The clerk, too, refused at first, for propriety's sake, but when the invitation was repeated accepted, obviously flattered.

"I'll be delighted to join your company," he said. Then buttoning his frockcoat straight up, and placing his hand theatrically on the back of the chair, announced:

"This being the case, allow me to introduce myself— Kruglikov, Vassili Spiridonovich, ex-collegiate secretary. Glad to make your acquaintance."

"So, you were in the civil service?"

"Yes, at the Naval Commissariat."

Now fully clad, the postman shook our hands in parting and said: "Is that spirits you've got? I'll have a go at that, too." And so he did, and then out he dashed into the cold. I put on my coat and followed him outdoors.

You had to walk to the edge of the cliff where the grave with the leaning cross was to watch the mail-coach depart.

Bristling with the white hummocks, the river scintillated in the faint silvery glow of the moon which hung high above the mountains. From the opposite bank, about four versts across, were cast dark oblique shadows. Their outlines blurred, the forest-clad hills receded farther and farther away as they followed the gentle bends of the Lena.... And more than ever the big frozen expanse of the river was a sad and eerie sight to behold.

As their three troikas of the mail started out, the bells, as though to spur one another, broke into a loud discordant tinkle just below my feet. Three black specks that might have been fantastic, multi-bodied animals, heaved across the snow, flickered in between the hummocks, steadily shrinking in size. Even after they had long vanished from view, the tinkle of the bells lingered on clear as ever in the glassy air. Every bell played its own distinct tune, the force of the sound but not its clarity diminished by the distance. Then abruptly everything ceased, only the hummocks sparkled in their weird chaos; the hills slumbered in sombre shadow, and strange phantoms drifted low beneath the distant banks.

Practically all the people of the station had come out to see the mail go off. At godforsaken At-Davan tucked away in the foothills of the Lena the coming and going of the mails was a momentous occasion.

But now At-Davan throbbed feverishly with the expectation of yet another event.

As soon as the mail sledges departed and the tinkle of their bells died away, the group of cabmen that had stood around it, climbed slowly back to the top of the bank and trooped past me, chatting in Yakut. Though their soft-spoken vernacular was unintelligible to me, I surmised that they spoke of the expected person rather than the departing ones, of the man due to arrive from the upper reaches of the river. I had indeed once or twice caught the name "Arabin" and the word *"toyon"* added to it.

Unable to cast off the spell of the river's enchanting sadness I lingered for yet a while on the bank. The air was still, with a gentle, crystalline clarity, undisturbed by a single sound, and yet pregnant with timorous anticipation. It needed but the crack of an ice-hummock to send a shudder and a moan through the icy stillness of the night. Or should a boulder

fall from under my feet, the gentle silence would explode in a succession of crackling and strident echoes....

The frost nipped harder. The station building, half yurta and only half Russian loghouse, was ablaze with light. Sparks clustered into the air from the yurta chimney. Thick white smoke rose upwards and then curled in the direction of the Lena, drifting afar, to the very middle of the river. The blocks of ice that served as windows now seemed to come ablaze and glow with the rainbow hues of the flaming fire. With a last glance at the melancholy but tantalising scene before me, I walked back to the posthouse.

V

At the cabmen's quarters a fire blazed in the huge hearth sturdily laid out of clay, gaping like the fiery maw of a fairytale monster, and boisterously rising upwards in a river of flames into the outlet of the chimney. The pinnacled walls of the yurta seemed now to draw together and be bathed in a russet glow, now to move apart

and sink into gloom, giving the yurta the appearance of a big, sombre, vaultlike cave. A group of flame-etched figures, looking as though they had been freshly cast in molten metal, formed a half-circle around the fire. In the centre of the group, peering pensively into the fire, his chin resting on his hands, sat a man of that cast of face that betrayed mixed Russian and Yakut ancestry and was peculiar to the inhabitants of the middle reaches of the Lena. Mingled with the hiss and crackle of the fire, from his throat issued strange sounds—now long-drawn, now shrilly rasping—of an improvised Yakut song, in which only an accustomed ear could detect evidence of a peculiar harmony. "Goodness!" I mused. "How differently human emotion is expressed!" But since beauty is in the sentiment itself, there must have been a beauty of its own kind in that jarring, rasping, guttural shrieking, now resembling a wail, now the howl of the wind in a wild gorge. It needed but a glance at the bronzed faces of the At-Davan cabmen to become aware of a spiritual light in the cheerless squalor of the yurta.

As the young man sang, the rest listened, now and then encouraging the singer with short, shrill outcries. We have our songs, recorded, made into sheet music, in which more sophisticated feelings have been crystallised into an enduring form. And the wild taiga, the rocky paths above the Lena and grim, forsaken At-Davan have their songs as well. They are unrecorded, unpolished, unharmonic and obviously crude. And yet for all their unrefinement, these songs, like the Aeolian harp, are attuned to every gust of mountain wind, every stir of rigorous nature, every tremor of the miserably tedious life. The young man sang of the growing frost, of the crackle of ice from the Lena, and the horses huddling under a cliff. He sang that a fire blazed bright in the hearth, that they were ten cabmen gathered around the fire, and six of their horses stood at the tethering post, and that At-Davan expected the arrival of Arabin, the *toyon,* which meant that a storm was approaching from the great city in the north and At-Davan trembled and quailed....

Yakut song language is as different from the vernacular as Old Slavonic from the

Russian spoken today. Its origins may be traced to the far interior of Central Asia, where out of the great melting pot of nations, the chip of-a tribe was tossed into the remote north. And thither it brought and preserved the southern florid images and colours. To the north, on the other hand, to the tingling frosty air, where the crackle of ice rang with the force of a cannon shot and the fall of a stone thundered like an avalanche, Yakut song owed its apprehensive penchant for staggering hyperbola and bewildering exaggeration. By and large this must explain why Er-Sogotokh, the Yakut counterpart of the Russian simple-minded fairy-tale hero Ivanushka, comes up in the course of his wanderings against such hefty stalwarts, the smallest of which has calves with the girth of a larch trunk and eyes of five pounds weight each.

Unobserved, I stood in the shadow, listening to the song about Arabin, the *toyon.* Arabin? Surely the name was familiar? It was by considerably straining the memory that I managed to free my mind of the fairy-tale associations and bring forth the image of a real person. I now recalled having met a couple of times

—and they were only fleeting encounters— a junior Cossack cavalry officer by that name at a home I visited in Irkutsk. I remembered that he was in no way remarkable, a taciturn fellow, somewhat shy, perhaps with that kind of shyness that marks morbidly sensitive people. I hardly noticed him at the time, but gathered later that he had attracted the attention of the Governor-General and was charged with "special missions". Could he be the man I kept hearing about all along my journey— when in Irkutsk he was just a face in the crowd?... This was his third courier's lightning journey down the Lena, and each time he passed the desolate river reverberated with talk about him for a long time afterwards. He behaved at the posthouses where he stopped like a man whose single efforts alone were expected to put down a rebellious area. He stormed in, raged, struck panic into all hearts, threatened with his gun— and "forgot" to pay for services. In all likelihood, it was these methods that enabled him to execute his missions with such quick dispatch that even the most seasoned officials could only gasp and wonder, while he himself won more and more favour with his superiors.

"Courier" was now a name that stuck to him and he accepted the courier duties as almost a full-time job. In the city of Irkutsk he was bashful and restrained but he turned into another man when he started on a trip. The genuine conviction that power carried far more weight than law, and the knowledge that for weeks on end he alone could hold the whiphand of authority over a vast territory, meeting not with the least resistance anywhere, could have turned a stronger head than that of a junior Cossack cavalry officer.

Indeed, his head had been turned—and to such an extent that on his last journey he swept through the few scarce towns of the area (Kirensk, Verkholensk and Olekma), standing in his sledge and waving a red flag. This must have been a fantastic sight—two troikas careering along, the mortally frightened coachman frozen in his seat with the reins in his hand, and the "courier" standing up and waving his flag with a mad light in his eyes. The town leaders looked on disapprovingly and the townspeople took to their heels. On this last journey, Arabin's path was marked by such a great number of fallen horses, outcries and

grievances which finally burst forth, that the postal authorities deemed it necessary to interfere. Getting a little ahead of my story, I can only say that Arabin was the cause of a quarrel between two government departments, that his immediate superiors were compelled to dispense with his services, but that being supplied with excellent references he got himself transferred farther eastward, to the banks of the Amur, and rounded off his career by shooting dead a postmaster. This made him famous in European Russia, too. However, he was never brought to trial, for it turned out that the great "courier" was mad as a hatter.

Such was to be the subsequent story of this much dreaded ill-starred *toyon* whose arrival was awaited at the remote little station of At-Davan that night, and about whom the Yakut sang his dolorous ditty in the cabmen's quarters of the posthouse.

VI

Mikhailo Ivanovich sat at the table in the posthouse reception room with nothing

on save his underclothes. Across him, surprisingly relaxed, slumped Vassili Spiridonovich Kruglikov, the posthouse clerk. Judging by Mikhailo Ivanovich's animation and the frank glint of greed in his eyes, he must have managed to steer the conversation on to his favourite topic which revolved around stories of how people got rich quick. It flattered this worthy's cupidity to know who, where and in what manner amassed a fortune. Mikhailo Ivanovich greatly savoured all particulars of such fortune-hunting dramas. And Kruglikov gladly supplied them with the cool assurance of a disinterested bystander.

"You say he lost his money?" asked Mikhailo Ivanovich leaning all the way across the table.

"Every bit of it!" replied Kruglikov blowing at the tea in his saucer. "May I say, sir, that all he had left to his name was the shirt on his back, and even that did not belong to him."

"Goodness, my dear fellow, what a man to be ruined!"

"Ruined? Not at all! Why should a man like that be ruined? In this part of the country and with a head like his?"

"Lucky rascal! So he mended his affairs?"

"That he did as never before!"

"Well, well, what did he turn to?"

Kruglikov put down his saucer and crooked a finger.

"First, he married his second wife, a widow of means, but not much to speak of...."

"Hold your horses! His second wife? What about the first? She died?"

"She is indeed very much alive! But that's nothing!"

"Ah-ah-ah! We-e-ell? Go on with the story!"

"He started little by little selling spirits at a mining town."

"Spirits? You make me laugh! Spirits won't get you far, more likely landing you a prison term than making you rich. Times are changed!"

"Don't say that ... not if the liquor business is a cover for buying gold on the sly from the prospectors."

"There is something in that! If you're a shrewd fellow."

"And that one was shrewd. He knew how to play his advantages and he ended up with a pile of money."

Mikhailo Ivanovich slapped his knee.

"My, what a head! What a head!... Have more tea!" he offered cordially when he saw Kruglikov replace his empty glass on the saucer as a sign that he was well pleased but would not mind having another glass if pressed (a flat refusal required putting the glass bottom up on the saucer and crowning it with the remaining bit of the sugar lump). "Help yourself! And don't fret about getting a position. I'll get you a good one. I like a chatty man. But let's have the truth—are you a heavy drinker?"

Looking him squarely into the eyes, Kruglikov replied:

"I take a drop, but I don't regard myself as a drunkard. And if I drink it's owing to my present wretched state after my former comfortable life. Ivan Alexandrovich, too—you've surely heard of him for he owned rich mines— would ask: 'Why do you drink, Kruglikov? With a brain like yours, you've no business drinking. You comport yourself well, write a fine hand, are neat in dress.... You're cut out for a fine job—if only you kept away from the bottle.' And all I answer: 'My heart won't let me, Ivan Alexandrovich....'"

Kruglikov became greatly agitated. He seemed to forget to whom his outpourings were addressed or what occasioned them and, beating his breast, he continued confusedly:

"Ivan Alexandrovich, my benefactor, do not judge me too harshly. Good Lord! I'd even drink tar, boiling tar, to get just a little relief, to forget. Tar! Oh God! What have I done to deserve being stuck away in this godforsaken place, where a pood of grain costs four and a half rubles and of beef eight rubles, and where you can have neither peace nor sustenance!"

"True enough," agreed Mikhailo Ivanovich, "provisions are expensive here."

"It's not that!" The little clerk spoke with sudden anguish. It rang poignantly in his voice, flitted in a shadow across his face, and worked a change in his entire ludicrous figure. "It's the rage in my heart and the thoughts that rankle...."

"You're not given to contemplation?" interrupted Mikhailo Ivanovich, horrified yet sympathetic.

"Sometimes!" Kruglikov confessed ruefully.

"Snap out of it, man. It's a bad business. I was given to it, too, as a young man, but

my late parent beat it out of me. Even after I got married I'd have fits of depression—making me feel sick with the world. A nasty business!"

"The worst there is! There are times when I wake up in the middle of the night with a start. 'Where were you born, Vassili Spiridonovich, and where did your youth pass?' I ask myself. 'And look what a wretched existence you are dragging out now....' It may be a night filled with the crack of frost or the howling of a blizzard. I go to the window, forgetting that it is a solid block of ice—and then draw away and pour myself a drink in a hurry...."

"It brings relief?"

"It goes to the head, dopes you, befuddles, because I brew and hop up my brandy—yet there is no actual relief."

"A fine mess! Give up drinking then, and get taken up with something worthwhile—that'll go to your head no worse than alcohol. But what have you done, I'd like to know, to get yourself dispatched to a place like this?"

Posed with such sudden brusqueness, the question sent a shudder through Kruglikov. Once again he seemed transformed, his figure losing its

comicalness. It was as though a spark suddenly came through to the surface of a long extinguished but still smouldering heap of ashes.

He started, cast down his eyes, and in a somewhat hollow tone of voice asked permission to pour himself a drink.

"May I?"

"Help yourself!"

He poured himself a drink, peered at the tumbler against the light as though searching in it for an answer to the awkward question, emptied it at a gulp and blurted out:

"I loved!"

Mikhailo Ivanovich gave a gasp of surprise. I, too, eyed the clerk with amazement, so unexpected was this brief and frank reply. Nor was Kruglikov unaware of the sensation his answer produced.

Recovering from his surprise, Mikhailo Ivanovich said vexedly: "Can't you give a proper answer!"

"It's the truth," replied Kruglikov. "My love for a certain young lady is responsible for my having fired two pistol shots at my superior, Councillor of State Latkin."

We were now quite flabbergasted.

Mikhailo Ivanovich could only stare in blank stupefaction at our interlocutor. He recalled a traveller who, after having conversed for an hour or two with a most affable casually met companion by whom he is enchanted, suddenly discovers that the person before him is none other than the celebrated Rinaldo-Rinaldini.

"Pistol?" he inquired unbelievably. "Not really? You don't mean to say you fired out of a pistol?"

"Most assuredly, a real pistol."

"You fired?"

"I did—twice."

"What a thing to do, man, a thing that's almost political...."

"It was done! You may judge me as you will.... I was in love."

"Won't you tell us, Vassili Spiridonovich, how it all came about?" I said.

"Do tell us, man!" Mikhailo Ivanovich upheld my suggestion. "Do! Why not? It is most amazing!"

VII

After swallowing his last gulp of tea, Kruglikov turned over the glass, crowned it with the remaining piece of sugar, and moved it aside. Having done with tea, he poured himself a drink and again examined it against the light. At the moment I regretted I was not a painter. For I would have liked to put on canvas the various emotions I saw playing in the candlelight on the now quite striking face of the At-Davan posthouse clerk. There was the round face, ash-blond neatly combed hair with the suggestion of a forelock, the potato-shaped sidewhiskers and the clean-shaven jowl. The grey eyes peering at the cognac held against the light and revealing a speaker's pleasurable thrill and pride in having roused his listeners' eager interest and at the same time the bitter regrets and searing memories of a shattered life. With a backward toss of his head, he emptied the glass of cognac, put it down on the table, brushed his worn foulard kerchief against his lips, and only then applied himself to the story.

"The story of my life, esteemed gentlemen, is extremely sad.... A person of sensibility will be aware of it—but there

are those who laugh at me. Well, it's all one...."

He smiled a bitter smile, still maintaining a pose, but then inquired:

"Have any of you, esteemed gentlemen, ever been in Kronstadt?"

"Where is that?" asked Mikhailo Ivanovich.

"Close to Petersburg, about two hours' ride by boat. Kronstadt is a port."

"I was there," escaped from my lips.

"You were? In Kronstadt itself?"

Briskly Kruglikov turned towards me with an animated gleam in his eyes.

"Yes, and moreover I lived there for a few months."

"Kronstadt is magnificent—the harbour and the fortress! A stronghold and a lookout into Europe! A capital place, a part of St. Petersburg."

"Yes, it's a fine town."

"Oh my, it's more than that. Goodness, where will you find another like it? And I've gathered from a passing officer that Catherine Street has been paved with metal slab. Is that a fact?"

"It is."

"How beautiful it must look! The landing-stages, the wharf, Fort Paul, Fort Constantine...."

And as he waxed enthusiastic, my thoughts, too, momentarily transported me from the dismal Lena to Kronstadt where as a student I had spent a few happy months. As it was with Kruglikov, memories assailed me—the sea waves splashing and merging with the Neva, a ship hooting, the long dike resounding with the click of horses' hoofs as the newly landed passengers were driven off in cabs, plying launches and patrol boats, puffing steamers.... I saw in my mind's eye white skiffs flashing their oars in unison, ponderous cruisers, the German church spire, streets cut across by the dock canals, where amidst the houses, like whales mysteriously tugged into the middle of a city, lay the great hulks of warships with their towering masts. There were mansions, boulevards and barracks, and there was the high life and glamour of a metropolitan offshoot.... And again a forest of masts against the blue sky, the wharf, a spit sloping into the sea and the tumult of the tide.... The azure sea, the sparkle of the waves and the massive forts

jutting out into the water. I could see clouds, white-winged seagulls, a lightweight launch with a listing sail, a Finnish sail-boat churning the waves with a creaking and moaning, and the smoke of a steamer from afar, from behind the Tolbukhin lighthouse, sailing off westward, into European seas!...

The illusion was swept away by a new crack on the frozen river—the night's frost was setting in with a vengeance. Though muffled a little, the sound penetrated through the walls of the posthouse. It was as though some monstrous bird cut a swift passage across the river with a wailing cry that grew louder with its advance, thundered past, and then, with the fainter fluttering of the giant wings, died away in the distance.

Mikhailo Ivanovich gave a nervous start and then with annoyance, as it often happens after fright, turned upon Kruglikov.

"Well," he said impatiently, "is it that you were born in that town or something? Get on with the story!"

"Yes, I was born there," Kruglikov proudly cut him short. "I first saw the light of day in Saidashnaya Street. Do you know

Saidashnaya Street, sir? My father had a house he owned in that street and for all I know it may still be standing there. Although he started out as a tax-collector, my father held quite a lucrative position and naturally did his best for his son. He did not give me much of an education, just the rudiments of it and seeing that I develop a good hand, but being a dependable young person, proficient in my work, and somewhat in the eye of my superiors owing to my father, I could say my prospects were of the brightest.... Yes, the beginning of my service held quite different promise from the position I have been reduced to today. A bright beginning and a sad eclipse."

"Don't grumble!" Mikhailo Ivanovich chid him. "And so ... I said, my dear sirs, that my father had a house of his own in Saidashnaya Street. And in the same street, just about across the way, lived a colleague of my father's, risen from a tax-collector's job, too, and who owing to longer service held an even more lucrative post."

"What post?" Mikhailo Ivanovich could not help inquiring. "At the naval dry dock —where the salaries' were nothing to

boast of but the chances of adding to them plenty and quite simple. You'll get my meaning if I tell you there was hardly a day that an official left the dock without rolling a length around himself."

"Just what is that?" asked Mikhailo Ivanovich perplexedly, for much as he knew of all the devious ways of making money this particular form baffled him.

"You see, it's like that. A naval vessel is not one of your cargo boats. Let alone its smart appearance, the lashing, shrouds, spars and so on, the interior furnishings are done in fine luxury materials. There's got to be splendour and gloss and one might say comfort, too.... Well, let me tell you, that the warehouses were bursting with these materials—velvets from Lyons, silks from England, mountains of them! And now imagine an official going home at the end of the day: he removes his frockcoat, takes quite a bit of silk, rolls it round and round himself, dons his frockcoat over it and leaves the warehouse. Then on coming home his wife unrolls the silk from him like from a spool—and they are that much richer."

"A clever trick! But isn't he frisked on his way out?"

"Oh no! The workers are, of course, at the gates, but the gentlemen officials are treated different, on the basis of trust."

"I see the possibilities. But you need to be smart. A greedy man hogging everything would land in the lock-up. After all you have to do with the Treasury!"

Seeing how carried away Mikhailo Ivanovich was getting, I interrupted in my turn, "Do continue, please!"

"Yes, of course, that's not the point. But that it was all simple is quite true. Simple! You can't get away from it—there was very little education and a lot of corruption. To this I owe the cross I now bear. In short, my father's fellow official had a daughter two years my junior— going on for eighteen. A beautiful girl, and bright, too, so that her doting father, eager to humour her, had at her request even engaged a student to give her lessons. The student was clever and learned and charged a small fee—so why not give the girl a chance to learn!"

"A foolish thing!" put in Mikhailo Ivanovich. "The best way to spoil a girl!"

"To go on with the story, I was affianced to this girl, to Raisa Pavlovna. Our parents were good friends and we had practically

grown up together. That we should marry had been settled between our fathers. Moreover we were very fond of each other. At first we were good friends and playmates but later the relationship grew more serious and with no obstacles put in the way by our parents we saw a good deal of one another."

"And sinned?" Mikhailo Ivanovich tried to anticipate events.

"Nothing of the kind," Kruglikov cut him short coldly. "Never entered our thoughts. We were two innocents. Reading was Raya's favourite pastime and I shared it with her. At first there were stories about all kinds of knights, about Francis of Venice, then ones that touched the heart, nothing serious, but they appealed to us—like reading about the margravine of Brandenburg, the princess of Bavaria, and along with them about the stern *seraskier....* Most of the reading was about high-minded individuals exposed to all sorts of vicissitudes because of the loves and fidelities with which they were perpetually preoccupied. Just the thing for our young heads! I was busy at my clerkship, but Raya after attending to the household snatched every free minute to

indulge in reading. Retiring to her room, she would get up with her feet on the sofa, and settle down with a book, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. After my working hours we went promenading arm in arm—usually, as did everybody in Kronstadt, along the rampart, or up at the wharves where we could look at the sea. Raya told me what she had read during the day. Sometimes she would stop to think and then ask:

'"...See, Vasya dear, what true love means. What about us? Could we be like that? Would you remain true to me, for example, if difficulties arose? Supposing some cruel *seraskier* was after my hand?...'

"And I would say:

'"I would, yes, but there is no need. We have our parents' blessing and can walk up the church aisle any day we please....'

"I made light of her words, for I knew more of the world, going to the office every day as I did. But she persisted:

'"Can you see that sail passing near the lighthouse?'

'"Yes, there's a brig sailing from across the border.'

'"What if there is a pirate on that boat who descends on the town, sets it on fire, strikes you down with a spear and takes me captive?...'

"And as she said this she shuddered with fright and clung closer to me. I tried my best to reassure her:

'"Have no fear, darling! That's just a Dutch or English merchant vessel coming with bales of cotton. And look at all the English walking in our streets today. To be sure there are those who get rowdy sometimes, but then they land up in the police station.'

'"Yes, ours is a very different life,' she said. 'Dmitri Orestovich, my student tutor, too, makes light of everything.

But I could do with some excitement,' she concluded with a sigh.

"When it was time to think of our wedding, our fathers began to talk business. My father did not think that there should be any delay in setting the wedding date. 'My son will get six thousand from me,' he declared, 'what about your daughter?'

"To which Raya's father replied: Til make it the same amount so it adds up to

twelve thousand. Surely they wouldn't want any more?'

'"That won't do,' says my Dad. 'Figure it out for yourself: my son will be promoted and get on in the world, while your daughter will remain just as she is save for getting old. You shouldn't really grudge them any less than ten thousand....'

"One word followed another and soon they were all worked up. Raya's father was a hot-headed man, and my father's back was up so that he wouldn't concede an inch. Whereupon the other lost his temper.

'"If you value your young pup four thousand rubles above my daughter,' he said, 'then the bargain is off. My daughter will marry a general who is surely a cut above your milksop.'"

"So it was diamond cutting diamond," Mikhailo Ivanovich chuckled.

Vaguely aware of the interruption, Kruglikov shot him a perplexed glance. Then he continued:

"Good grief! That set the ball rolling. At this point I ought to tell you that it was my superior who had been favouring Raya with sweet looks. He was not a full general by a long shot but at the board we never addressed him as anything else but

'excellency'. This was on his own insistence. 'In the eye of outsiders,' he would say, 'I may rank less than a colonel, but to my subordinates I'm no less than God Almighty and the tsar!'"

"Very true, I dare say!" Mikhailo Ivanovich cut in again. "God Almighty is high above and the tsar far away, but your superior is there on the spot ready to get at you. Very true, indeed!"

"The colonel was an elderly childless widower. Somehow, hard as he tried, he failed to get himself a bride in his own circle. He was very ill-favoured in looks. Then Raya caught his eye; she herself was entirely unaware of this, all the more so that I was already her avowed fiance. It's all the past—but I was rather personable, though shortish; I had a moustache, my hair was well pomaded, and I was something of a dandy.... At the beginning Raya's father showed pity for his only child. But now, touched on the raw, he bristled up and forbade me the house. The general's attentions were encouraged—and soon there was his carriage parading in our street...."

At this point Kruglikov's eyes moistened—and the spark from under the lashes

burst with a bright flash — only to be extinguished by yet another drink of brandy which he raised to his mouth with a violently quivering hand, so that the brandy spilled and trickled down his pique vest.

"He started coming more often, on foot, too, and with presents. I dared not even approach her door, for fear that if I ventured in I might run into the general. I felt quite wretched.... One day when going home from the office and passing the lodgings of Raya's student tutor—he lived in a small annex writing a book there and making stuffed animals—I caught sight of him sitting on the doorstep. He was sucking his pipe. Even now when I am told he has become a person of importance in his field he never lets that pipe out of his mouth. Well, learned men are bound to be a bit queer, as you know."

Kruglikov now got up from the table, smiling gently, went into his dark little cubby-hole, and after rummaging in a chest, brought back with him an old volume for us to see.

"Take a look at this," he said.

A whiff of the past came to me from this volume. It proved to be an 1860 edition

dealing with natural science in a general way and was part and parcel of that movement of thought whereby our early probing of nature set out proudly to conquer the world. Though it did not achieve the spectacular success it hoped for, the fresh wave of thought yielded many young shoots, and quite a few noted names rose from the movement. One of the names, though perhaps not of the most illustrious ones, was on the cover of the book.

"Dmitri Orestovich is the author of this book," Kruglikov asserted. He carefully wrapped the book in some of the post-office forms. It was apparent that he cherished it dearly, perhaps as a proud memento of his sad past.

"When the student saw me," Kruglikov resumed his story, "he called out:

'"I want a word with you, Sir Knight!'

"As I approached and greeted him, he continued in the same bantering tone:

'"Surely you have not completely abandoned your margravine of Brandenburg who is pining away for you?'

"Looking me up and down he continued: 'And who wouldn't be pining away for a knight so gallant?'

"Though he was now poking fun at me, I knew him to be the kindest of men, and Raya, too, while fearing him at the beginning for his jesting and short temper, later thought the world of him. Not the least offended, I begged:

'"Do tell me what to do, Dmitri Orestovich!'

'"Don't you know what to do?'

"'No!'

'"Neither do I! However, I have a message for you from Raisa Pavlovna. She would like you to call after dusk this evening. Her father will be out and that horrid *seraskier* who is after her hand is away in the town of Tambov. Well, good-bye!'

'"Advise me what to do, Dmitri Orestovich!'

'"On such a matter I cannot give advice! I did try to tell Raisa Pavlovna to throw overboard all her *seraskiers,* along with her Sir Knight, but she refused to take my counsel. So would you, I presume....'

"I felt as sad as could be, and now grew somewhat resentful of his banter. Was I worse than any other young lover to be laughed at like that? It was indeed my hard luck that my superior had his eye on

my girl—but was I to blame for that? However, the thought that I was going to see Raya that evening cheered me up.

"After it grew dark, I stole into the house, Raya flung her arms around my neck and burst into tears. I could hardly recognise her. She was pale and wan, and there was a new look in her big eyes. But her beauty—it was breathtaking! My heart stood still. I was puzzled by the change in Raya.

'Vasya, darling,' she was saying, 'dear heart, how good of you to come. You've not for-forgotten, not aban-abandoned me?'"

Kruglikov's eyes suddenly filled with tears. He choked and gasped for breath. Getting up from his seat, he retreated to the wall and stood there facing some sort of postal notices.

When my glance fell on Mikhailo Ivanovich I noted with amazement that the flaccid features of that none too sentimental worthy had drooped and his eyes blinked.

"What a story! It goes to the heart!" he exclaimed, and then addressing himself to Kruglikov continued, "Come, poor chap, take another swig of the brandy. What can

you do about it all? Oh our life! A vale of tears!"

Shamefacedly Kruglikov returned to the table, poured himself a drink, gulped it down, and mopped his face with his kerchief.

"Beg pardon, gentlemen, it's too painful.... Well, that was the last time I held Raya in my arms. From then on she became Raisa Pavlovna to me, out of reach ... a memory, sacred.... And I unworthy...."

"Now, now," Mikhailo Ivanovich interrupted quickly to prevent a fresh gush of feeling. "Why don't you get on with the story, brother, instead of going to pieces?"

"Well, we spent that evening together, and Raya cheered up a little.

'"Why are we so heartbroken,' she said. 'It's not as though one of us is dead! It looks like our own time has come, if you recall our talk at the rampart. It's come about just as I said: the cruel *seraskierhas* turned up, and he's none other than Latkin himself.'

"She laughed and I joined in. It was often this way: Raya to me was like sunshine breaking through the clouds, and I basked in that sunshine....

'"Courage, Vasya, let us show the true worth of our love,' she continued. 'We must not surrender. I know I shan't. Let me show you what I bought the other day....'

"From her chest of drawers she took out a pistol and showed it to me. It was rather small, but a real one. My heart stood still, but on leaving her house I picked up the pistol and slipped it into my inside pocket. Then I forgot about it, nor did Raya seem to miss it. The following day I went to see my father. I found him in his room sitting over some blueprints for a new vessel which was then under construction. He turned his head towards me, but kept his eyes averted, for he must have known then that he was killing me with his pride. But it might have been just my fate.

'"What brings you here?' he asked.

"I fell on my knees pleading but he wouldn't listen. Then I rose and proclaimed: 'If this is the case—I am of age and will marry Raya without a dowry.'

"My late father, I must say, knew how to control his temper. He had a short thick neck—and the doctor warned him that undue excitement could bring on a stroke. Therefore he refrained from shouting or violent scolding. Anger could make the

blood rush to his face, but it never affected his voice.

"'You're a dolt, Vasya,' he declared quietly, 'a dolt. This is empty talk—you won't do what you say. But when I say something I mean it. And mind—be you of age or not—I'll thrash the life out of you if you disobey me.'

'"You won't dare! I'm a civil servant!'

'"So, you doubt my word?'

"Off he went to the window, opened it, and beckoned with his finger to two brothers living in a little detached house in our yard. They were a pair of ruddy-faced hefty bullies with huge moustaches—retired artillerymen who turned to cobbling. They mended or resoled shoes, made new ones, but mostly went in for brandy swilling. When they came in, they paused in the doorway, wiggling beetlelike their bristling moustaches and waiting to be offered a drink. This my father did promptly.

'"Here, gentlemen of the artillery,' he said, 'to start with is a bit of *schnapps.* And now take a look at this young fellow. Would you be willing to chastise him as with my parental hand?'

"The younger exchanged a glance with the elder brother and replied:

'"Certainly—for with the parental hand it's within the law.'

'"Bear it in mind for the future. When I give the signal, take him in tow, lay him flat and load him with lashes! And now off you go, the three of you!'

"On the following day at the office I was told to report to the general. I found him seated in his armchair, drumming on his desk with his fingers. He greeted me with a scowl, said nothing and still scowling beckoned to me to approach.

'"You've been dilly-dallying, I believe, young man,' he said.

'"No, Your Excellency, my mind is on my work. I'm never dallying, for I dare not....'

'"Oh, you needn't address me as Excellency', he said. 'Have no fear, young man, I hold it to be quite the fashion nowadays to have no regard for one's superiors. You are contemplating marriage, I believe?'

'"Isn't it a lawful intention, Your Excellency, in a man of my age, moreover if he had his superior's permission.'

'"I see, and have you a certain young lady in mind?

"I hesitated to reply and he wagged a finger at me.

'"See, Kruglikov, your conscience is not clear where your superior is concerned. You're hedging.... Well, you had better put that young lady completely out of your mind. There are better prospects for her. Run along!'

"I walked out of his office with tears flowing from my eyes. The people working with me were surprised, thinking I had made some blunder in the lists I drew up. The lists go hang! I was wretched: here I had my superior, at home there were the retired artillerymen, who ran out of their house every time they saw me coming and kept their eyes on the window waiting for a signal from my father. I did not know what to do, had nobody to turn to, and saw no way out. I was wasting away. My father had noticed this and forbade the two brothers to molest me; once they had so frightened me when they jumped out of the house in the hope of my father signalling to them that I dropped on the ground in convulsions frothing at the mouth. Thus realising that he had gone too far with his iron-hand rule, my father ordered that I be left alone and himself became more

considerate. However, he couldn't conquer his pride ... may he rest in peace! Out here I used to receive letters from him three times a year, money too.... Before he died he sent me a missive: 'Will you ever forgive me, my son, for ruining your life?' The Lord, I thought, would forgive him. But me—I have been shown no clemency...."

"Well?" Mikhailo Ivanovich once again broke the brief, depressing pause. Kruglikov resumed his story.

"My adversary saw I had become weak and pressed his advantage. In about a week's time or so he summoned me, and met me gravely.

'"Put on your coat,' he said. 'Remember, Kruglikov, that above all I expect loyalty from my subordinates, and will not tolerate anyone who does not show it.'"

"That's clear!" Mikhailo Ivanovich approved heartily.

Kruglikov again ignored the interruption.

"Soon we were on our way, in his carriage," he continued. "And do you know, my dear sirs, where we were going? To Saidashnaya Street, to Raisa Pavlovna herself!"

"Whatever for?" broke from my lips.

Kruglikov looked at me with an expression in which added to the memory of his old sorrow was a touch of vanity.

"As a matchmaker," he replied somewhat proudly.

"Goodness knows what you're talking about, Vassili Spiridonovich!"

"Not goodness knows what, but the actual truth.... It was indeed at Raisa Pavlovna's request that I went. She had said to my superior: 'If he has given me up as you claim he has, then have him come here as your matchmaker.'"

"Oh, what a wench! A sharp one!" Mikhailo Ivanovich cut in again.

"And you went?" I inquired not without reproach.

"He made me go...," replied the narrator shyly and then turned with sudden brusqueness to Mikhailo Ivanovich. "You, my dear sir, have not understood anything in the least, and your remark shows utter lack of feeling."

"I have no need to understand such as you!" my puzzled merchant friend parried this unexpected sally.

"Then keep s-s-silent," Kruglikov cut him short in a strangely shrill voice, and again turned to me.

"Yes, dear sir, as you have justly remarked, I did go with the general. And mind you, when later I was taken to hear sentence pronounced on me in front of the crowds in a public square—I suffered less. Yet I went, and people saw the two of us alight from the carriage in Saidashnaya Street. The general frowned darkly and I looked terrible. But all the same, dear sir, I had gone along—and I leave it to you to judge of me as you see fit.... That's how it was! As we stepped into the hall we bumped into Dmitri Orestovich, the student. He was on his way out of the house. Stopping for a moment he took one look at me and said: 'Just as I thought! My Prince of Venice! You're a fine one!' And to the general: 'And there I believe is the cruel seraskier!'"

Kruglikov inhaled deeply and smiled.

"Dmitri Orestovich had a brusque tongue and was also fearless by nature. His words made the general turn livid. Til have you know, young man, that I'm his Majesty's civil servant, a Councillor of State, and no *seraskier....*' The student

shrugged and said: 'No matter who you are, but you're wasting your time in this house, and that's a fact.' With these words he walked right out and let the general vent his anger on me: Til never forgive you this, never....' Now, dear sir, what justice is there in this world that I should be made answerable for another's rudeness?

"Presently, we entered the drawing-room, and there was Raisa Pavlovna, my own Raya and now the general's bride-to-be, sitting on a couch. She fixed me with a stare of her great big, tear-stained eyes. I lowered my gaze. Was this really my darling, I asked myself. No! For she was as far removed from me as if she were perched on the highest mountain. I paused in the doorway. The general walked right up to her and took her hand. 'My queen,' he said, 'doubt no more, for the young man has come.'

"She rose and leaned with her hands against the table, looking as though she did not know me. The general, too, turned to me, both of them now eyeing me while I went on standing in the doorway. 'Vasenka....' Raya's lips seemed to frame ... but then she fell back on the couch in a fit of laughter.

'"Why not make the man your flunkey?' I heard her say. Pleased, the general replied: 'If my queen desires it....'

'"Yes, I do, and don't grudge him a decent wage....'"

Kruglikov paused as though a lump had stuck in his throat.

And he dropped his head on his chest to hide his face. A silence settled on the room. And so thick was the air with the smarting memory of the deep humiliation he must have suffered that even Mikhailo Ivanovich now gazing at the little posthouse clerk with wide-open, half-bewildered eyes dared not break this silence.

Finally Kruglikov caught his breath and cast at me a leaden glance.

"At this point," he said in a measured tone of voice, "at this precise moment, it was as though something hit me on the head—like waking with a start. I looked around the familiar room in which Raya and I had spent so many evenings together. And now there she was sitting on the couch, her face buried in her hands, and the general fussing over her. My eye fell on the very bureau which had contained the pistol and I remembered all

of a sudden that I had the pistol with me. It was in my overcoat pocket. I turned on my heels and quietly went out into the hall. The pistol was in my pocket—as though waiting for me to take it out. This I now did, and even laughed, if I remember right.

"I hurried back—must get there, I thought, before the general turns and faces the door. What followed most likely would not have happened if he had turned. But no! There was Raisa Pavlovna, weeping, hiding her face, and the general drawing her hands away from it. When I stepped into the room Raisa Pavlovna released her hand, glanced at me, and froze. I took one and then another step ... only let him not turn, I thought ... and fired at him from behind...."

"You killed him?" Mikhailo Ivanovich started in horror.

"No." Kruglikov heaved a sigh of relief as though the whole thing had weighed upon him like an oppressive burden. By the Lord's mercy, the shots lacked force and merely grazed the flesh of his hind parts. All the same the general dropped to the floor with a cry and lay there writhing and shrieking. Raisa Pavlovna rushed to him, but seeing that the injury was slight

walked away. She made a move in my direction—'Vasya, poor Vasya, what have you gone and done?'—but then shrank back and throwing herself into an armchair broke into tears.

'"Good God!' she said. 'Why did you sneak up from behind like that? Get out, both of you!' She was half-crying and half-laughing, working herself into a fit of hysterics. People ran in, and, naturally enough, I was put under arrest."

"Let's have a drink," said Mikhailo Ivanovich. "Is that the end of the story? It makes my flesh creep. Say, man, it's quite a story. What dare-devils you all are!... How can you?"

"To make it short, I was tried by the old law by which no leniency was due to me. Had it all happened at a later date the court might have made allowances for my sufferings. But then guilt was the essential thing. I was deported. In a year, my father aged terribly, his health was undermined and he lost his position, and I have been wasting my life away in these parts ever since."

"What about Raisa Pavlovna?"

Kruglikov rose, stepped into his little cubby-hole, where he removed from the

wall a picture in a fanciful frame, designed with obvious assiduity by some skilful exile, and showed it to us. It was a faded family picture in which I saw a good-looking young matron, a man of a striking, well-defined cast of face and an intelligent gleam in his bespectacled eyes, and two children.

"Could that be...?"

"Yes—Raisa Pavlovna," said Kruglikov with respect. "And that is Dmitri Orestovich, her husband. They keep in touch with me. I am now expecting a letter from them for the New Year. It is in answer to my humble request that they sent this picture, and I get an occasional money order, too...."

He spoke with deference as though not at all of the Raya with whom he had once read about the princesses of the Rhine and the Prince of Venice. However, when he pointed out to us the elder of the two daughters, a slim, fair-haired girl with big pensive eyes, his voice quivered.

"She is the spit and image of her mother," he said.

Quickly he drew the picture away when Mikhailo Ivanovich reached out curiously for it, replaced it in the cubby-hole, and

paused there for a while, standing with his face to the wall as he did before in front of the postal notices.

A tremor passed through his whole figure in its skimpy little frockcoat.

VIII

After the story was told conversation flagged. Firewood was brought in by the posthouse keeper. Logs, too, were piled up in the huge hearth in the cabmen's yurta, because the fire is made to last the night. The fire blazed and crackled. And through the half-open door by the firelight were visible the figures of the cabmen reclining on the benches around the hearth.

At-Davan had settled down for the night.

Kruglikov set us up in the adjoining room where Mikhailo Ivanovich immediately fell asleep. The main posthouse room remained unoccupied.

"Keeping it for Arabin?" I asked.

"Yes," Kruglikov replied most gloomily.

The woman who had waited on us was apparently long asleep and for this reason Kruglikov attended to things by himself: he

filled the samovar with chopped ice, threw in the charcoal, and put it down near the fireplace to be handy. This done, he proceeded to clear the table, and in arranging the bottles did not fail to toss off a drink of something. He grew more and more sullen—and was decidedly wide-awake.

At last silence settled on At-Davan. It would be broken now and then by the crackling of frost outdoors, or the gentle patter of felt boots in the darkened rooms, filled now only with the reddish gleam of the flame, or again by the soft tinkle of a wine-glass and the sound of pouring liquid. The old memories that had been stirred up in him apparently kept Kruglikov awake; dolefully he wandered about the post-house, sighing, praying or mumbling under his breath.

I dozed off ..... I awoke in the dead of night, but it was to find At-Davan once again bustling with activity. A din came from the yard, doors slammed, cabmen hustled, snorting horses, the snow crunching under their hoofs, were being led away, shaft-bow bells tinkled alarmingly; all these noises erupted in a

steady flow of traffic from the station to the river.

In the big room Kruglikov was unhurriedly lighting the candles, the pallid bluish flame of the sulphur match suddenly flaring bright and illuminating the whole premises.

Kruglikov raised the match to the lamp, lighted the candle in it, and turned to face a new figure standing a few steps away. This was a man in a snow-powdered deerskin coat and hood. From under the hood there gazed a pair of black slanting eyes above a pale hatchet face with dark drooping moustaches, and I recognised Arabin, the *toyon* whose arrival has been anticipated with a good deal of fear and misgivings at the station of At-Davan for several days, but who to me was merely the shy, unimportant Cossack cavalry junior officer I happened to run into at Irkutsk.

From the look of things, Arabin's visit had not started out too bad. He seemed greatly wearied—either from the road or from playing the part of the formidable *toyon.* The impression therefore was that he merely wished to relax, drink some tea, and perhaps catch a little sleep. He stood

there slouching, sleepy-looking, as he waited for the room to be lit, with only a rare flicker of impatience breaking through his glazed glance. But it was Kruglikov who seemed to have undergone a strange change. He was no longer the funny, pathetic-looking man who only yesterday pleaded to have mercy on him and demand no horses. He looked sullen, grave, and restrained, with a grim resolve in his desultory movements. He even seemed to have grown in stature. It appeared that the relating of his story, the large amount of brandy he drank, the fumes that were passing through his head, already disturbed by the stirring up of old memories, and the sleepless night had quite an effect on him.

"Damn it!" Arabin ejaculated impatiently. "Get a move on!"

Kruglikov retorted calmly, "Not so loud, please, there are travellers asleep...."

Arabin was removing his cap and when it was off a flash of astonishment showed in his dark eyes. But he still seemed eager to keep his temper under control.

"Hurry up with the samovar," he snapped discarding his deerskin and sitting down at the table.

"The samovar's ready."

"Get the horses!"

"Your travelling coupons, please?"

Arabin jerked his close-cropped head with the ears protruding slightly in Mongol fashion. His eyes now flashed with more than mere astonishment. Rising to his feet he repeated:

"Get the horses! Quick!"

"Travelling coupons, please," Kruglikov cut him short with a kind of defiant composure.

There was a stir of movement. Mikhailo Ivanovich had woken up and, now sitting up in bed, was trying to pull on some article of clothing without making a noise and with a wary look, as though the station were on fire or overrun by an enemy. He craned his neck and in the half-gloom his artlessly cunning eyes glinted with fear and curiosity.

"Well, well," he whispered leaning towards me. "Some business. That Kruglikov is a dare-devil.... Remember, old chap, we haven't seen a thing. The last thing we want is to be called in as witnesses...."

Not until I heard these words did I grasp the situation. To demand of Arabin, the

dreaded *toyon,* to pay for his horses, and moreover in so resolute a tone was on the part of humble At-Davan nestling beneath the rugged Lena mountains, an unheard-of impertinence. Arabin jumped to his feet, reached out for his pouch, snatched a paper out of it and angrily thrust it at Kruglikov. It was quite obvious that fatigued and overwrought as he was, he wished to keep within certain bounds, and that the part of the dreaded *toyon* was too strenuous and irksome for him to play at that late hour in pleasantly warm and brightly lit At-Davan. But neither did he want to pay for the horses, all the more so that the ways of the quiet and meek Lena were well known to him. It would be a blow to his prestige to pay for his horses in At-Davan. The news of it would spread like wildfire from place to place, the cabmen saying that Arabin, the great *toyon,* had been made to pay up. And all along his path, the money would be claimed. Most likely he hoped that Kruglikov had forgotten who he was and the paper he handed him would remind him; but it only made matters worse.

Unhurriedly Kruglikov unfolded the paper, and after reading it through

carefully, his eye lingering on every line, remarked:

"It says here: '...to be given four horses for the established charge.' And you demand six for two carriages and pay nothing. It's unlawful...."

He said this in a calm enough voice and yet his words seemed to sweep through At-Davan. The loud din that had filled the station subsided, the cabmen crowded with timid interest round the doors leading from their quarters into the main room. Mikhailo Ivanovich held his breath.

Arabin roused himself. He glared round the posthouse, straightened up and brought his fist down on the table with a furious scowl.

"Silence!" he shouted. "What's this? A rebellion?"

"No rebellion whatever, only what the law demands, by order of His Imperial Majesty. And it's high time the law were...."

Kruglikov did not finish the sentence. A violent blow knocked him off his feet; Arabin was about to advance on the prone figure....

I rushed into the room—and stopped Arabin now stood facing me, surprised at

my sudden intrusion which, I believe, delivered both Kruglikov and Arabin himself from the further consequences of his fury. Arabin's pallid face twitched and there was something wild and morbid in his rolling eyes. This junior Cossack cavalry officer, who forgot his low rank and imagined himself truly a mighty *toyon,* holding his head as high as the Lena summits, was suddenly brought back to reality by my presence—to Irkutsk, to the low-ceilinged room where his head hardly reached any higher than dozens of other unremarkable heads.

But whatever confusion he experienced and whatever feelings now stirred in Arabin's breast, were lost on the men of At-Davan. They saw only the blow, and the clerk's sprawling form. The door from the yurta was slammed, bustling was renewed in the yard. From the room where we had slept came the sound of Mikhailo Ivanovich's obviously feigned snoring.

The rebellion had been put down, and Arabin to the men of At-Davan had remained the same all-powerful *toyon* about whom they had chanted their song.

Presently Kruglikov picked himself up. Our eyes met and I involuntarily turned

away. There was something so pathetic in his glance that it wrung my heart—a look that only people in Russia have.... He rose, walked to the wall, leaned with his shoulder against it and buried his face in his hands. His figure was just as we saw it yesterday, only even more crushed, humiliated and pathetic-looking.

The servant hastily carried in the samovar, casting a sidelong glance of pity at her master.... Arabin, panting, sat down in front of the samovar.

"I'll show you how to rebel!" he snarled. Whatever words followed were hardly intelligible, except for the suggestion that "witnesses" could go to the devil, the mention of an officer's honour, and the like.

IX

Meanwhile, in the half-gloom of the room where we had slept, Mikhailo Ivanovich was completing his toilet. A few minutes later he appeared in the doorway, fully dressed, buttoning the last of his

buttons, clearing his throat, and wreathing his face into the most affable smile.

Arabin eyed this new intruder with a fretful and uncomprehending look, wondering apparently what this smiling and bowing stranger advancing towards him with a tripping gait might want from him. However, his puzzlement at the friendly smiles and curtsies, prevented a fresh outburst of his still smouldering fury. With a hand that shook he brought the saucer of hot tea up to his lips and watched gloomily out of the corner of his eye Mikhailo Ivanovich's manoeuvrings.

"What do you want?" he finally snapped, putting his saucer down on the table.

Mikhailo Ivanovich winced a trifle, but then resumed his disgustingly fawning air.

"Nothing really, just to present my respects ... apparently you do not recognize me.... We met at Lev Stepanovich's, the *ispravnik,* had a talk, and even ... negotiated a bit of business...."

"Oh yes, I now recall it," Arabin said absently and turned his attention back to his tea.

"Precisely," Mikhailo Ivanovich exclaimed joyously. "And may I ask what mission brings you here?"

"That's none of your business!"

"Fair enough," Mikhailo Ivanovich agreed meekly, "for it may be secret...."

Poor Mikhailo Ivanovich could not understand that the mere mention of Irkutsk, the *ispravnik* and other down-to-earth matters rubbed Arabin the wrong way, shattering the illusion of the grand and epic world in which he still dwelt.

"F-fair," Mikhailo Ivanovich repeated musingly and to keep the point of vantage he gained added confidentially: "I don't blame you for flying off the handle as you did a short while ago. Even an angel would lose his temper in these parts!"

Casting a sidelong glance in the direction of Kruglikov, Mikhailo Ivanovich said with a sigh:

"Boorishness!"

But the ice was not broken. Arabin ignored Mikhailo Ivanovich. Finishing his tea, he took out a pad, jotted down something in it, hastily donned his clothes and hurried to the door. But then as though having weighed something in his mind and arrived at a sudden decision he stopped and, making sure that he was unobserved by any of the cabmen, he threw down angrily some money. Two bills

flashed through the air while the silver coins rolled clinking on the floor. A moment later he was outside and soon we heard the wild tinkling of his sleigh bells coming from the river under the high cliff of the bank.

It was all so unexpected and performed so quickly that we three silent witnesses of the scene did not at once grasp its meaning. As always in money matters, Mikhailo Ivanovich was the first to comprehend.

"He paid," he ejaculated in astonishment. "Do you hear, Kruglikov, he's paid for the horses. Can you beat that?"

None of the cabmen had witnessed this concession on the part of the dreaded *toyon.*

X

Late that morning we were again getting settled into our sleigh. The frost had not abated. From behind the mountains, looming blue in the wintry haze, streamed in the first pale bars of

sunlight. The frozen horses struggled to get free and it was with difficulty that the cabmen restrained our troika.

At-Davan had sunk into a bleak and cheerless quiet. Shaken by the night's misadventure, depressed and humiliated, Kruglikov saw us to the sleigh, shuddering with old, the effects of liquor and sorrow. It was with a strange servility that he now helped Mikhailo Ivanovich into the sleigh, tucked his feet under the rug and drew the warm covers around him.

"Mikhailo Ivanovich, be my benefactor," he entreated. "Bear in mind about a position for me. I won't be able to stay on here after what happened last night...."

"All right, I'll see about it," Mikhailo Ivanovich replied half-heartedly.

Just then the cabmen jumped aside releasing the horses and our troika darted off down the ice-track. Fast behind us receded the steep bank. And the misty mountains that had seemed mysterious and fantastic in the moonlight now advanced towards us, grim and bleak.

"Well, Mikhailo Ivanovich, will you secure him a position?" I asked when our horses had settled into a steady trot.

"No," he replied flatly. "Why, pray?"

"He's a harmful and most dangerous man. Y-yes.... See what *you* can make of his actions. He seemed ready to comply with his superior's request there in Kronstadt—and comply he ought! He'd have been happy for the rest of his life if he'd given up that girl of his. Surely there's no dearth of brides. He'd give up one and take another. Bother them! And in return he'd get a promotion. But look how he'd served his superior—by shooting him out of a pistol. Now, however you judge it—who would like it? What sort of behaviour is it? Today he'll treat you like that and tomorrow me."

"But that was long ago. He's a different person now."

"Don't be too sure. You heard the way he talked to Arabin last night?"

"I did, but he merely claimed what was his right to claim."

Mikhailo Ivanovich turned impatiently towards me.

"You're an intelligent fellow and yet you don't understand a simple thing. Claim indeed! Was he the only one whom Arabin did not pay? No, he must have covered thousands of versts without paying

anywhere. So who did he think he was to claim the money!"

"Arabin was obliged to pay."

"Obliged? Who obliged him—you and your Kruglikov, I dare say!"

"The law, Mikhailo Ivanovich."

"Law indeed!... He, too, harped on it yesterday—the law. And does he know what kind of word it is—'law'?"

"Pray, what?"

"It's that kind of a word—you may speak it once, but ten times you must keep mum about it, until you're asked. The law, by law'," he mimicked. "You're a dolt with your law! Who did he think he was to instruct his superiors in the law!"

Seeing how inordinately worked up Mikhailo Ivanovich was getting, and fearing lest I completely spoil Kruglikov's chances I now tried to intercede for him by merely reminding Mikhailo Ivanovich that he promised to help him.

"What of it?" he replied. "I only promised out of pity...."

"Get us up!" Mikhailo Ivanovich suddenly roared, as our sleigh in negotiating a sharp incline had overturned and he found himself again crushed beneath my weight.

We were compelled to climb out. And it struck me that in this particular spot the river had fought against the frost with the greatest ferocity, for here the huge white hummocks closed in on all sides obscuring the vista ahead of us. The rugged mountains alone, formidable and awe-inspiring, stood out from the mists on either side and, far away, above the chaotic mass of hummocks a wreath of curling smoke was faintly traced against the sky....

That was the last we saw of At-Davan.

1880

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

LIGHTS

Long ago, on a dark autumn night, I was journeying in a rowboat on a grim Siberian river. Suddenly from round a bend of the river, beneath the dusky mountains, a light loomed.

It shone bright, commanding, positively near....

"Thank God!" I cried out with joy. "Shelter is near!"

The oarsman turned his head, glancing over his shoulder to look at the light.

"Tis far away!" he said indifferently, and went on plying his oars.

I did not believe him: the light stood out so bright, piercing the murky darkness. Yet he spoke the truth: the light indeed proved to be far away.

It is a feature about nocturnal lights that they approach out of the dark, and beam, and promise, and tantalise by their proximity! Another few strokes and one thinks the journey is at an end—when indeed the light is far off!...

On and on we journeyed upon the jet-black river. Dark chasms and cliffs sailed into view, advancing, drifting off, remaining behind and being swallowed up by the endless vistas, while the light still shone, twinkling bright, beckoning—seeming near and yet being so far away.

Often I recall the dark river lying in the shadow of the rocky banks—and that beaming light. Many lights, before and after, have tantalised both me and others as well by their seeming proximity. But life flows between the same grim banks and the lights are still far off. And again you have to ply your oars. And yet ... and yet lights are there, ahead!

1990

ALEXANDER KHRABROVITSKY

The Life of Vladimir Korolenko

Vladimir Galaktionovich Korolenko was born on July 27, 1852, in the town of Zhitomir, Ukraine. His father was a judge, a man of honesty and integrity. He died when Vladimir was fifteen, leaving his family without any means of subsistence.

"It was partly due to the state stipend, but mostly to the heroic efforts of my

mother who, though frail in health, battled valiantly for the future of her children, that I was able to complete my course at the classical school and go on to Petersburg in search of higher education. However, I began my new life in the capital with seventeen rubles in my pocket. I spent two years in a dogged fight against poverty, trying, without much success, to reconcile two tasks, that of getting an education and earning my daily bread. I still cannot understand how I managed to survive the first year in Petersburg without any means whatever. On the second year I took to colouring botanical atlases for children and on the third I found a job of proof-reading which threatened to engulf all of me. But at that time several friends of mine managed to get into Petrovskaya Academy of Agriculture and Forestry in Moscow, or, rather, near Moscow and wrote to me suggesting that I join them."

Korolenko became enrolled at Petrovskaya (today Timiryazev) Academy, was given a state grant and there seemed to be no reason why he should not complete the course and become a forester in due course. But in 1876, when Korolenko was in his third year, events

occurred which entailed a drastic change in his entire life.

Great resentment was rife among the students of the Academy over the collaboration of the Academy's administration with Moscow Department of the Gendarmes (political police). Facts had become known of the administration's assistance in students' arrests and other opprobious activities. Korolenko penned a protest on behalf of the student body, put his signature first and was chosen to present that protest. This action of the students was classified as "rioting" and reported to Tsar Alexander the Second himself. Korolenko was expelled from the Academy, arrested and banished from Moscow. This was his first public action and the first of the many acts of suppression he was to be the object of.

There followed the harshest period in Korolenko's life. With a short interval of eighteen months, it lasted for nine years, from 1876 to 1885. During this time Korolenko was incarcerated in the prisons of Moscow, Petersburg, Vyatka, Kostroma, Vyshni Volochek, Tobolsk, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, and Yakutsk and lived in exile in the remote village of

Beryozovskiye Pochinki in Vyatka Gubernia and in the village of Amga in Yakutia.

The amazing fact was that the tsarist police inflicted all these ordeals on him without bringing any concrete charges against him, just on account of his "subversive tendencies", which were first revealed in his clash with the administration of Petrovskaya Academy. Korolenko's staunchness, his steadfast defence of his own and his comrade's rights galled the powers that be and they went out of their way to victimise the rebellious exile. For instance, Korolenko was transported from Vyatka Gubernia to Siberia for an alleged attempt to escape, which was an invention from beginning to end.

In 1881, after the assassination of Tsar Alexander the Second, Korolenko, like all the other exiles, was required to swear allegiance to the new tsar Alexander the Third. Though all he had to do was put his signature to the text of the oath, an act which was considered to be a pure formality, Korolenko, who would not admit of a compromise with his conscience, refused to sign the oath, declaring: "My conscience forbids me to give the pledge

that is demanded of me in its present form." For this refusal Korolenko was sent from the town of Perm in European Russia to the backwoods of Yakutia.

In Beryozovskiye Pochinki Korolenko lived in a peasant hut where the stove had no chimney and where people choked with smoke whenever it was heated. The hut housed not only people but also farm animals belonging to the family. In Amga in Yakutia Korolenko had to do heavy peasant work, ploughing, sowing, mowing, reaping, etc. He baked his own bread, washed his clothes, cooked meals, even made his own footwear. "Life tossed me about in such a whimsical manner," he wrote later, "that I have had a chance to see and, what is most important, to feel, all strata of the Russian people, beginning with half-wild Yakuts and inhabitants of forest wilds in European North where they do not yet know the ordinary cart, and ending with urban workingmen."

In 1885, when Korolenko's term of exile expired, he was nearly 32. He was forbidden to take up residence in the capitals and settled in Nizhni Novgorod. Here he started on a literary career and soon earned a name for himself. The work

that brought him fame was the short story "Makar's Dream". It is a story of a half-Yakut peasant, a drunk, a thief and a cheat. After death he is called up for a judgment, where the good and the evil man did in life is weighed up in a balance. Makar's sins send the big wooden scale down into a pit. The Big *Toyon* as he refers to God in his mind, sentences him to a long period of expiration. But at this point human dignity rears up in the uncomplaining Makar. He begins to defend himself, describing how he was driven all his life: "The village Elders, the foremen, the justices and the *ispravniks* were always after him to pay his taxes and the priests to pay the tithes. Hunger and misery drove him hard; he had suffered from the drought in summer and the bitter frosts in winter; the taiga and the frozen soil yielded him nothing!" Has he ever, Makar goes on, known affection, kindness and joy? And yet he, too, "was born like the others—with bright open eyes, in which heaven and earth were reflected, and with a pure heart which was ready to hearken to all that was beautiful in the world...."

In the end "the scales started to swing, with the wooden scale now rising higher and higher".

This story bespoke Korolenko's love for Man, his ability to glimpse the innermost workings of his heart, his passionate desire to see man straighten up to his full stature and defend his human dignity. "A person has rights and must stand up for them, both for his own and other people's sakes," wrote Korolenko, and this is the key idea of "Makar's Dream". The story was a tremendous success, and not only as a work of literature either. The merchant from Nizhni Novgorod Zarubin had this to say about it to Maxim Gorky: "...I read 'Makar's Dream' and wept, it moved me so! Imagine that one person can be that sorry for another! Everything turned upside down in me from that moment."

The stories about Siberia, "Sokolinets" and "Murderer", and the short novel In *Bad Company,* telling about "down-and-outers", about wretched pauper children, established Korolenko as a first-rate writer. His language aroused particular admiration, the authentic speech of simple folk which he employed in his stories. "What amazing language! I have known

nothing like it in the entire Russian literature," Lev Tolstoy said about Korolenko. Chekhov said that "Sokolinets" sounded like "a good musical composition".

The short novel *The Blind Musician* published in 1886 was destined to become Korolenko's best-known work. It was translated in all foreign languages. This story treats the theme of the overcoming of egoism as the necessary condition of human happiness. In the epilogue Korolenko says, speaking of the hero of this novel: "In the place of the old suffering —blind, selfish, not to be allayed—he carries now in his soul a true knowledge of life. He has come to know other people's sorrows, and other people's joys."

Korolenko journeyed a lot over Nizhni-Novgorod region. "I have recently returned from an excursion in Nizhni-Novgorod Gubernia," he wrote after one such trip. "Most of it was done on foot with a sack behind my back. Roads, forests, fields, free winds and impressions galore." On another occasion he informed his friend in a letter that he had "gone down nearly the entire length of the Kerzhenets in a rowing boat. The trip lasted five days,

and I spent four nights on the sandy banks with fishermen. There was a thunderstorm on one of the nights, from which I hid under my boat."

These trips gave rise to a series of poetic essays "In Deserted Places" and a number of short stories, of which "The River Plays" is the best known. This is what Maxim Gorky had to say about the image of Tyulin drawn by Korolenko in that story: "Hundreds of books have been and are being written about the Russian peasant, but it was Korolenko who gave an exhaustive portrayal of the soul of a Russian muzhik, who drew a historically authentic type."

One of Korolenko's greatest literary achievements is the short story "At-Davan" telling about a petty clerk who refused to submit to an appaling humiliation and paid for his rebellion with a life banishment to Siberia. The telling of the story of his ruined life arouses in the exiled clerk the consciousness of his human dignity and gives him the resolution to rebuff an abusive bully of a Governor's courier.

The writer is fully on the side of the clerk, he rejoices in this outbreak of protest. He cherishes every instance of

resistance against suppression, arbitrariness, injustice.

The story "Without a Tongue" is placed in America. Korolenko visited the United States in 1893, when he attended the World Fair in Chicago. "This book is ... about how America appears to an ordinary Russian person at first glance," he wrote about the story. The misadventures of Ukrainian peasants who emigrated to America in search of good fortune, their collisions with American reality are described in tones of gentle humour.

In his autobiography Korolenko wrote that "only half of him was given to belles lettres. The other half went in for publicistic writing". He did a lot of "fighting with his pen", writing articles for newspapers and magazines on the most topical and urgent problems of his time. "The tip of a steel pen," he wrote, "proved to be a weapon capable of dealing and repulsing blows."

Korolenko dealt many a blow to bureaucrats, policemen, all kinds of parasites, exploiters and oppressors of the people, to the very order of tsarist Russia. He saw his main purpose in life in

awakening "the civic awareness in society and among the people".

In 1891-1892 the Nizhni-Novgorod Gubernia was hit by a famine. Korolenko went to the villages, set up canteens for the starving peasants on funds made up of donations, launched a fierce struggle in the press against the landowners, *zemstvo,* functionaries and the Governor who sought to conceal or belittle the scope of the catastrophe. Subsequently he collected those articles into the book *The Year of the Famine.*

Korolenko's vigorous literary and public activities made him a central figure in Nizhni Novgorod. Gorky referred to the period of his stay in the city as "Korolenko's time". The gendarmes maintained a close surveillance over Korolenko's activities and exerted themselves in writing denunciations against him to their head office. In 1889 Tsar Alexander the Third, upon reading one of Korolenko's stories, demanded information about the author. The Gendarmes' Department provided a memorandum, upon which the Tsar drew his resolution: "Obviously Korolenko is a

highly subversive individual, though he has talent."

Korolenko spent eleven years in Nizhni Novgorod. In 1896 he moved to St. Petersburg. His last significant public venture in Nizhni Novgorod was the defence of Multan Votyaks.

A group of peasants from the village of Stary Multan, Votyaks (Udmurts) by nationality, were accused of murdering a passing beggar for the purpose of making a human sacrifice to their heathen gods. A bloody crime was imputed to an entire nationality. Korolenko attended the trial in the capacity of a correspondent and became convinced in his mind that the Votyaks were innocent and that the entire case had been fabricated by the police and the prosecutor with a view of furthering their careerist ends. After the verdict of "guilty" was brought in and the sentence passed, Korolenko started a campaign for the repeal of the sentence and a re-trial. "These people are in a terrible plight though they are innocent of any crime, an outrageous injustice is being perpetrated, and I cannot think of anything else," Korolenko wrote at the time.

The re-trial was eventually held, with Korolenko acting as counsel for the defence. His speech in defence of the falsely accused peasants shook the audience to such an extent that even the court stenographers stopped making notes and listened spell-bound. The jury acquitted the innocent Votyaks.

During the trial Korolenko received a telegram which informed him about the death of his daughter whom he had left seriously ill. "On the fourth of June the Multan trial was concluded," Korolenko wrote in his diary. "I was afraid, practically certain that my girl was no more, but the joy of securing the acquittal was so great and gushed into my heart in such a wave that there was no place left for any other emotions (true, this mixture cost me a lot. I have a feeling that in those days I lost several years of my life)." After the Multan case Korolenko developed an acute nervous insomnia. "I've grown grey and old during this year," he wrote in his diary.

Korolenko's stay in St. Petersburg lasted from 1896 to 1900. He was editor-in-chief of the journal *Russkoye Bogatstvo,* wrote many publicistic articles for the journal

himself and gave much of his time to work on manuscripts of beginning authors.

The scope of editing work that Korolenko carried on throughout his life is really amazing. In the course of 1903 alone he read 504 manuscripts, and wrote a review of each, some of these reviews being veritable critical articles in their own right. Gorky, who himself benefited from Korolenko's tutoring, wrote that Korolenko the editor was "an excellent coach of young authors".

The Multan case earned Korolenko country-wide recognition as a noble-spirited public figure, and people appealed to him for help from all parts of Russia, fully convinced that he would respond and do his best to help. He was called "Russia's conscience".

In 1899 Korolenko received a letter from the town of Grozny in North Caucasus. A complete stranger informed him that a certain Yusupov, a Chechen by nationality, had been sentenced to hanging for highway robbery which he had not committed. Later Korolenko wrote that the moment he read the letter he realised that he was now sharing responsibility for the life of that man and for the sentence

passed on him. "If I managed to find a way, Yusupov may live, if I fail—he will be hanged."

Korolenko wrote a letter to the Chief Military Prosecutor, had a meeting with him and made the case public through the press. As the result the innocent man, who was already awaiting execution, was fully exonerated and set free.

In 1900 Korolenko moved to Poltava in the Ukraine, where he was to spend the remaining twenty-one years of his life. In that city, too, Korolenko combined creative writing with publicistic pursuits, editing and intensive public activities. In summing up the results of his life towards its close, he Wrote: "I realise I could have done much more if I did not have to divide myself between pure belle lettres, publicistic writing and practical enterprises like the Multan case or helping the victims of the famine. But I do not in the least regret it.... I could not act otherwise.... And it was necessary, moreover, that literature in our day and age should not remain indifferent to life."

In 1902 the famous "Academic Incident" took place. Tsar Nikolai the Second annulled the election of Maxim Gorky

Honorary Academician for the section of belles lettres, but the decision was announced not on behalf of the tsar but on behalf of the Academy itself. In protest against this sleight-of-hand and this gross interference of "police and administration", as Korolenko put it, into the affairs of the Academy, Korolenko renounced his own title of Honorary Academician. Anton Chekhov did likewise.

Korolenko's most stirring public action while in Poltava was his "Open Letter to Counsellor of State Filonov". Filonov, a high-ranking Poltava functionary, was put in charge of the punitive force sent to the village of Sorochintsi, where there had been a peasants' riot. There he staged a brutal mass punishment. He had the entire population of the village driven to its square, made them all kneel in the snow and kept them in this position for four hours, the Cossacks from his troop lashing the bent backs with their iron-tipped whips and Filonov himself calling individuals out of the crowd and beating them up with his own hands.

Korolenko concluded his account of this outrage with the following words:

"I am going to wait until—if there still remains at least a vestige of justice in this country, if you, your colleagues and your chiefs retain some measure of consciousness of professional honour and duty, if we have the institute of prosecutors, courts and judges who remember the meaning of law and the judge's duty—until one of us, you or I, is put in the dock and meted out legal punishment."

Korolenko urged for legal proceedings to be instituted against Filonov, but the trial never took place because Filonov was assassinated. The Black Hundreds and tsarist authorities then started a campaign of persecution against Korolenko, who was accused of "instigating a murder". They even attempted to fabricate a court case against him, and he was swamped with threatening anonymous letters. The Head of the city police wrote a secret report in which he denounced Korolenko as a person who was "harmful for law and order and public peace and deserving of an exile from the Gubernia to the far places in Siberia".

An investigation confirmed Filonov's crimes as presented in Korolenko's "Open

Letter", and the authorities did not dare to take measures against a writer who was widely known and respected not only in Russia but abroad as well.

In 1909 Korolenko wrote an article in which he protested against the wave of executions let loose after the defeat of the Revolution of 1905. The article was entitled "Everyday Occurrence". Lev Tolstoy wrote to Korolenko in connection with this article:

"Vladimir Galaktionovich! I have only just heard of your article concerning the death penalty and tried hard during the reading but failed to keep back—not tears, but sobs. I am lost for words to express my gratitude and love to you for this excellent article, both as regards expression and idea, and, most important, feeling that inspired it. It must be duplicated and distributed in millions of copies."

Soon after he moved to Poltava Korolenko started work on the main book of his life, the autobiographical story which he entitled *The History of My Contemporary.* In his foreword to the book Korolenko wrote: "In this book I endeavour to call back the memory of and revive a number of pictures from last half-century,

as they found reflection in the soul of first a child, then a young man then an adult person.... In my work I sought to keep as close,as possible to historical truth...."

The German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, who translated *The History of My Contemporary* into German, wrote: "This book is Korolenko's autobiography, a work of high artistic merit and at the same time a first-rate cultural and historical document." Gorky also gave a high appraisal to *The History of My Contemporary:*

"I picked up this excellent book and—read it through once again. And I will re-read it more than once yet—I like it better and better for its serious tone and its staid kind of modesty, little known to our contemporary literature. There is nothing flagrant, yet everything moves the heart. The voice is low, but gentle and mellow, the voice of a real person. Every page makes you aware of a wise kindly smile of a big-hearted man who has thought and suffered a great deal."

Korolenko did not finish *The History of My Contemporary.* Work on the book was interrupted by his death on December 25, 1921. The book embraces his early

childhood, school and student years and his exile wanderings ending with his arrival in Nizhni Novgorod.

The History of My Contemporary ranks with such classics of Russian memoirs-writing as Herzen's *The Past and Reflections* and the autobiographical trilogies of Lev Tolstoy and Gorky.

During the Civil War Korolenko took up the cause of children who had been evacuated to the Ukraine from the starving Moscow and Petrograd. He headed the League for the Salvation of Children. In the summer of 1919 two bandits broke into Korolenko's home. They were after the funds of the League. The old sick writer, his wife and daughter, unarmed, fought against the armed bandits, who shot at them, and succeeded in resisting them and keeping hold of the money on which depended the subsistence of seven thousand children.

Once, also during the Civil War, the writer was warned that an attempt is being planned on his life for his articles and advised to go into hiding. Korolenko replied: "I shall remain here even if the warning is well-founded. Death? Very well then! A writer must live up to his works."

Gorky called Korolenko's life "A hero's thorny path".

By *Alexander Khrabrovitsky*

NOTES

IN BAD COMPANY

This short novel was written by Korolenko at the time of his exile in Yakutia (1881-1884). It first appeared in 1885. According to Korolenko himself, many aspects of the story are drawn from real life, and "the scene of the action is a faithful description" of the town (Rovno) where the writer spent part of his childhood. The character of the Judge embodies some of the features of his own father.

THE STRANGE ONE

"The Strange One" was written in March 1880 during Korolenko's detention at the Vyshne-Volochek transit prison (February-June 1880), pending further deportation to Siberia. "How he managed to write it in the common cell with the endless commotion and tumult that went on," reminisced S.Shvetsov, one of the "politicals", "is beyond my comprehension.... He read 'The Strange One' to us at one of our meetings (right in

the common cell). It produced a tremendous impression." The idea was suggested by a story related to Korolenko by a gendarme who convoyed him at the beginning of 1880 from Beryozovskiye Pochinki to Vyatka. He has endowed his heroine, a girl exile, with the features of Evelyna Ulanovskaya whom Korolenko met in exile. The story first appeared abroad (London).

MAKAR'S DREAM

This story was written in the village of Amga in Yakutia, with the subtitle "A Christmas Tale". It was the writer's first work to appear after his return from exile in 1885. An Amga peasant, Zakhar Tsykunov, in whose house the writer had lodged, served as the prototype for this story's main character

THE RIVER PLAYS

Korolenko's Svetloyar impressions during his trip to Lake Svetloyar (Holy Lake) inspired him to write this story. It was rapturously received by Maxim Gorky who

wrote Korolenko from Capri (July 14, 1913): "It is my favourite story, which I believe has helped me immensely in fathoming the 'Russian soul'...."

AT-DAVAN

At-Davan is the name of a station on the banks of the Lena River lying at a distance of 300 kilometres from the town of Yakutsk. The story and its pivotal character, the courier Arabin, are derived from fact. Korolenko had heard a great deal about Arabin in 1881 from the coachmen and station masters along the Lena route while going to his exile in Yakutia. Korolenko tried writing in the press about Arabin's acts of violence, right after his return from exile in 1855, demanding that he be brought to trial, and later in 1887, after learning about Arabin having killed a station master. The articles, however, were not passed by the censorship. In 1892, when the story "At-Davan" was published, it turned out that Arabin was still alive, and instead of being locked up in a lunatic asylum or in prison, was at large in St. Petersburg; moreover he appeared with threats at the office of

the magazine which published the story, demanding a refutation.

LIGHTS

This is a kind of poem in prose, jotted down on May 4, 1900, on the spur of the moment in the album of the writer M. Watson. In a letter to one of his readers Korolenko had thus explained the substance of this short piece: "I did not mean to say that after the arduous journey would follow peace and happiness for all ... no, there would be yet another station to reach. Life consists in constant striving, achievement, and fresh striving."

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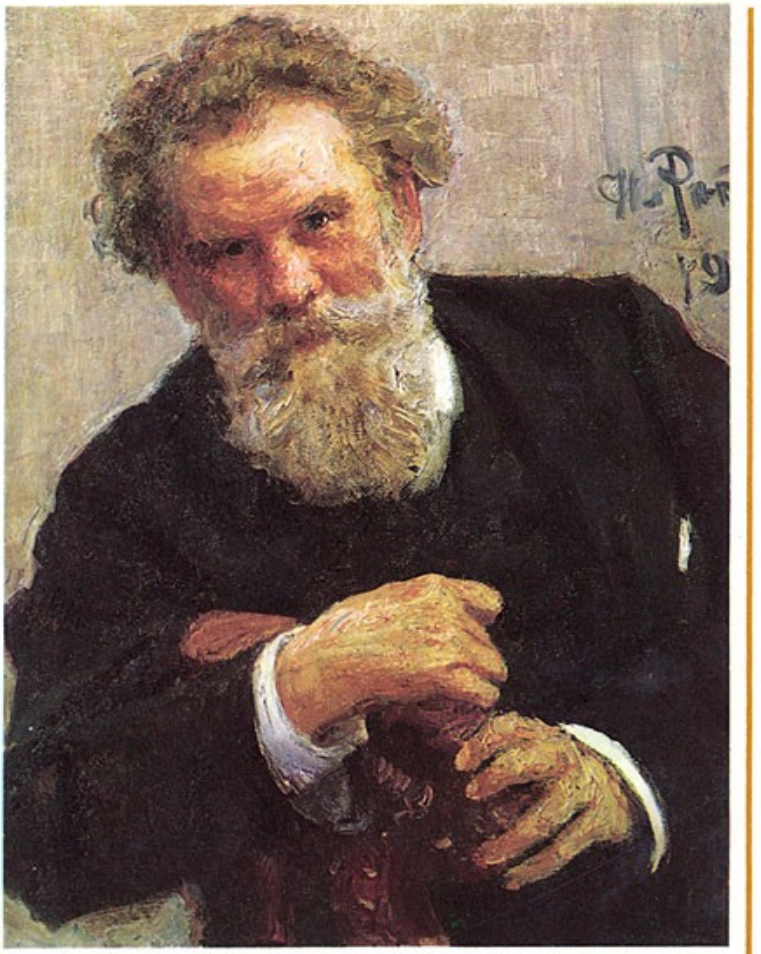

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